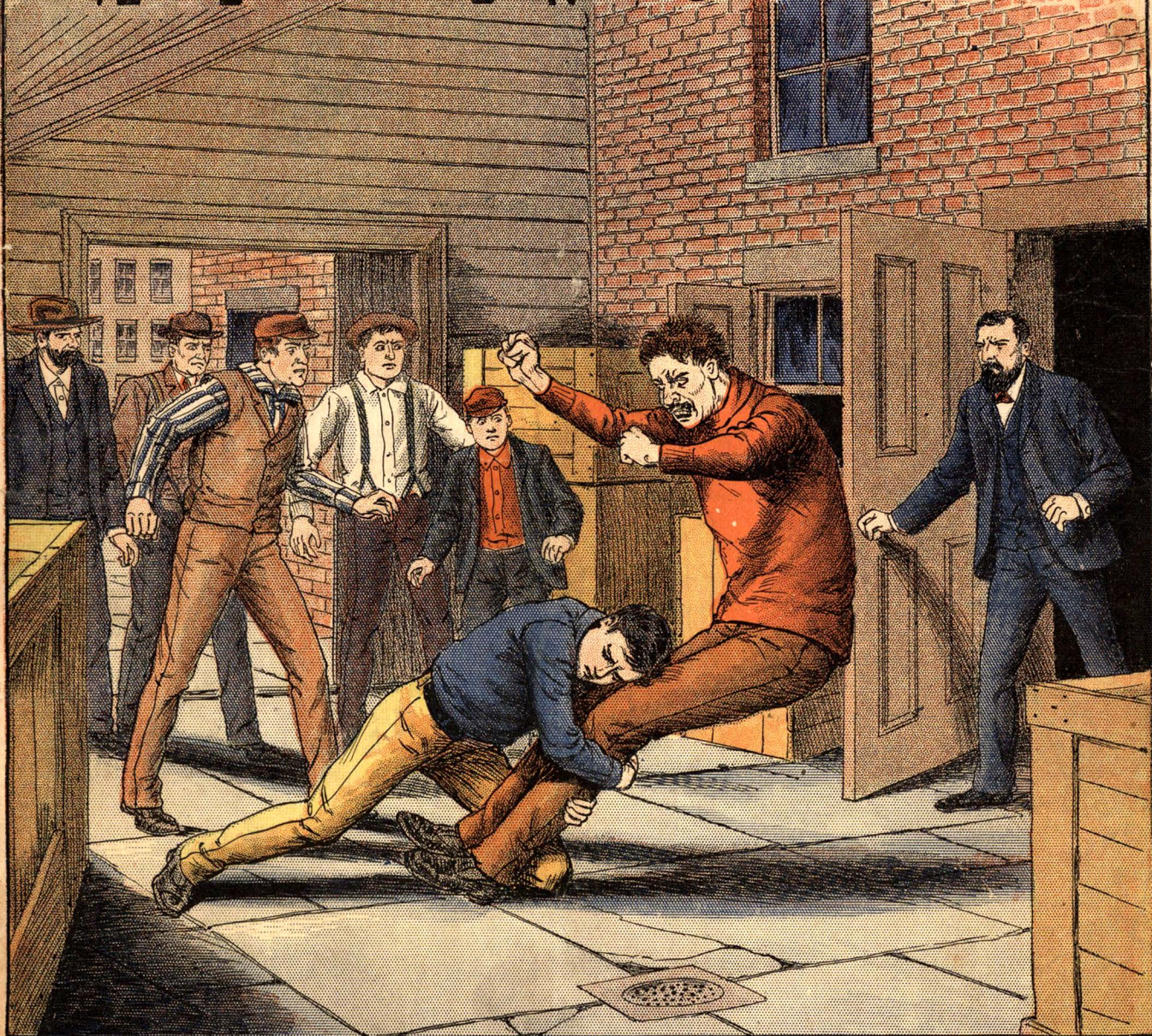


WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY **WEEKLY**. EVERY WEEK.

THE BOY WHO BALKED;

OR, BOB BRISBANE'S BIG KICK. *By FRANK IRVING.*



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The Boy Who Balked

HARRY M. LANE.

Bob Brisbane's Big Kick

By FRANK IRVING

CHAPTER I.

A TROUNCING ALL AROUND.

"Now, what I want to find out—and quick!" roared Mr. Allison, "is who is to blame."

The sole owner of the great leather goods house brought his fist down angrily and jarringly on his desk.

"I——" began Payson, stammeringly.

"Oh, you—eh?" glared his employer.

He wheeled savagely on the cringing shipping clerk.

"No, sir," almost whined the clerk. "I——"

"You said that before."

"Please let me go on, sir."

"Go ahead! Who's hindering you?" demanded this bully of an employer.

"I passed that order on to Mr. Rondick, sir," went on the shipping clerk.

Just here the assistant shipping clerk began to look more uneasy than before.

"What did you do with the order, young man?" roared Mr. Allison, wheeling upon the assistant.

"I—I passed the order on to Brisbane—at once, sir," stammered Rondick.

"Oh, you infernal liar!"

Bob Brisbane had meant to utter the words under his breath, but the words escaped loudly enough for all present to hear.

Payson, cringing slave, and liar from that fact, was quick to see that if he shielded his assistant, the latter, in turn, would protect him from the boss's wrath.

"That's quite true, as I know, Mr. Allison," the shipping clerk broke in, "for I asked Brisbane if he had received the order from Mr. Rondick. Brisbane admitted that he had."

"Another liar!" clicked off Bob, who now, white and red by turns, no longer made any effort to keep back his wrath.

"Dorman," blazed the head of the house, turning upon his head porter, "did you get that order from Brisbane?"

"No, sir," lied Cluck Dorman, promptly.

"Liar number three!" tallied off Bob.

"Now, it's your turn to do some lying, if you dare, young man!" snorted Allison, turning upon his book boy in the shipping department.

"I'm out of the running at the start, I'm afraid, sir," declared Bob, grimly.

"Oh, you are, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"Because, Mr. Allison," replied the boy, firmly, "all I can tell is the truth."

"You infernal young idiot," glared Allison, again banging his fist on his desk, "do you suppose I want anything else but the truth?"

"Then you're plumb out of luck," clicked Bob Brisbane. "You haven't been getting anything like the truth."

"I haven't, eh?" sneered the angry man. "Now, see here. I had a most important and valuable order to Mr. Payson. He hands the order over to his assistant, Mr. Rondick. Rondick, as is his duty, after entering the order, calls it off for you for your book. You're supposed to

attend to the order and to turn it over to Dorman for shipment. All the rest agree that Payson passed it on to Rondick, and that Rondick passed it your way. But Dorman denies that he got it from you. So the order didn't get off, and I'm in trouble with one of my best customers. Now, what can you, or any other young idiot, say to that?"

"All I can say is the truth," Bob insisted, firmly, despite the four pairs of glaring eyes that confronted him.

"The truth?" bellowed Allison. "That's what I want. Out with it!"

"Can the rest of you stand it?" demanded Bob, looking curiously around him.

They all nodded, though anxiously.

"Then here goes," challenged Bob, straightening up and looking boldly in each pair of eyes as he looked over the human half-circle that seemed to have conspired against him. "In the first place, not a word was ever said to me about this order. I saw it, with your initials on, Mr. Allison. It was lying on Payson's desk."

"Did you ask him about it, Brisbane?" sneered the boss.

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't."

"Why?"

"See here," squared the boy, "I've stood enough blame for things that I haven't done. Now, I'm going to kick back, and kick hard. If you want to know why I didn't, I couldn't ask Payson, because, after 2:30 yesterday afternoon he wasn't at the office."

"I was over at the freight depot," stammered Payson, going white.

"No, you weren't," defied Bob. "You were at the races. You made some losing bets at the track, too. Here are the tickets, with your name recorded on them as the bettor. There they are," and Bob threw them on the boss's desk, adding:

"When I saw this cloud gathering, I remembered that I had seen Payson throw some green slips in his waste basket. I fished them out. That disposes of Payson!"

"This is some dastardly plot," protested the shipping clerk, through lips that trembled.

But Bob, not heeding, went on:

"So I went to Rondick and asked him about that order. He told me not to meddle in what wasn't my business, and to wait until I got the order passed on to me. But Rondick had been drinking heavily, and I didn't think he was fit for business."

"Oh, what a lie!" gasped the assistant shipping clerk. "I never took a drink in my life."

"I'm out for your scalp, too, since you tried to get mine," uttered Brisbane, calmly, but his face white and set with purpose to see the thing through. "Mr. Allison, Rondick tells you that he never tasted liquor——"

"It's the truth!" quivered the assistant.

"Smell his breath now," requested Bob, ironically. "Mr.

Allison, I'll tell you where to look, and you can find that Rondick is a regular customer of that saloon."

"But what about that order?" demanded the boss, who was looking at least interested.

"Well, sir, not wanting to deal with Rondick any further, I came to this office to see you, but you weren't in. So, as I knew as well as anyone how important that order was, I took the liberty of handing it over to Cluck Dorman, anyway."

"You cheeky little liar!" gasped Cluck, a big, rough, red-faced, heavy-fisted, horny-handed fellow in the garb of a teamster.

"Do you mean to say that I didn't give the order to you?" demanded Bob.

"Of course you didn't," roared Cluck, aggressively, and, sticking his chin out in a way that meant fight.

"Men who drink too much beer in business hours have short memories," gritted Bob. "But I can clinch you, too, Dorman. You have forgotten that I made you sign on my book. Here's the book," wound up young Brisbane, triumphantly, "and here's your signature against the entry, Mr. Cluck Dorman."

"It's a forgery, then!" bellowed the head porter, stretching forward to snatch away the accusing book.

"Let Mr. Allison judge about that," returned our hero, darting away from angry Cluck and dropping the opened book on his employer's desk.

There was an awkward silence, broken by an angry exclamation, in chorus, from the three men whom Bob had accused:

"The cheeky little liar!"

But Bob, seventeen, of medium height and build, with wavy brown hair and blue eyes that usually were as mild as milk, now folded his arms, stood very straight and looked boldly at his three accusers.

"I'm not the kind of fellow to carry tales out of school," he remarked, coolly. "But this sort of thing has happened before, and I've simply had to do something to protect myself when I'm doing right."

"You've told a pretty strong story," grinned Allison. "It remains to be found out how true it is. Payson, I shall need an explanation later about these race-track tickets. Rondick, if I ever find that you're drinking in business hours, I shan't need you. Dorman, this looks like your signature. I want to think it over. You can go, you three."

Dorman, sullen, and the two clerks, white and trembling, left the private office of the employer.

"I hope you'll believe me, sir, when I say that I hated to accuse others in order to clear myself," began Bob.

"Oh, you needn't feel that you've exactly cleared yourself yet," leered Mr. Allison, a broad and thick-set, black-bearded man of fifty. Being rich, it never occurred to him that he needed to be careful about his clothing and appearance. Allison was, in fact, what he looked to be—a coarse brute.

"Oh, if you don't think I've cleared myself," flared Bob, his face growing red.

"No, I won't say that you have," grinned the boss. "But I will be willing to bet that you've made some very interesting enemies."

"Let them be enemies, then!" flashed the boy, disdainfully.

"That's all. You can get out, Brisbane. And you needn't feel that you're any less under suspicion than the others. Close the door from the other side."

Bob stepped from the private office into the long corridor that ran to the big counting-room up on the second floor of this great building on High street, Boston.

Through the corridor he stepped into the big counting-room where more than forty clerks were at work.

Bob could hardly help smiling when, at a little distance, he saw Payson and Rondick, standing apart by themselves.

They were talking in whispers, but started and stopped when they saw Bob coming unconcernedly toward them.

Then Payson wheeled, darting forward to meet our hero.

"What did you tell that sort of a string to the boss for?" demanded Payson in a low tone, yet one that thrilled with hate.

"Because it was the truth—and you know it better than anyone else," Brisbane flared back.

"You little liar! You thief! You——"

That was as far as Payson got.

Biff! All Bob's pent-up temper was let loose in the blow that he struck straight from the shoulder.

It landed just right, too, on Payson's left eye.

"Oh, you lying little thief!" groaned the shipping clerk, leaping to his feet with an eye that was fast closing.

Crack! Bob landed again, on the fellow's nose this time, and the blood flowed from that organ as Payson, too wise to rise again, lay on the floor.

"You tattle-tale!" quivered Rondick. "You sneaking spy! You——"

He ought to have known better, but he didn't.

Bob's fist landed on his neck, sending Rondick to his knees. Young Brisbane had become a human tornado by this time. He rained in four or five blows on Rondick, until that worthy cried quits.

Of course, the other clerks had rushed up, forming a ring around the lively ones, but equally of course no one attempted to spoil the sport of seeing a boy trounce two men.

"You go out and see Dorman," raged Payson, sopping a handkerchief against his bleeding nose. "You won't find the shipping yard a very safe place now. Dorman has it in for you, and he'll make you holler small in two seconds!"

"Will he?" gritted Bob. "We'll see!"

His head and his blood was up, now that the time had come to make a big kick all around, our hero pressing his way through the crowd.

Among the clerks, as the boy ran down the stairs to the

shipping yard, there was a general rush to the windows that commanded a view.

But Payson and Rondick did not join in the rush. Together they made for Allison's office.

The biggest thing on view in that shipping yard was Cluck Dorman, loudly running down the book boy.

"Here he is now," whispered some one in the little crowd that had gathered around the head porter.

"Where?" bellowed Dorman, wheeling about.

He espied Bob, just coming through the doorway.

"There you are, you little brat!" bellowed Dorman.

"Make good!" cried some one.

"You bet I will!" asserted the head porter, swinging his fists as he ran forward. "Brisbane, you little——"

Then Bob sailed in for all he was worth.

He ducked, caught Cluck by the knees, and sent that big bully smashing to the paved floor of the yard.

"Brisbane, how dare you?" roared Allison, coming through the doorway.

In the next breath the boss added:

"You're through here! Git—and stay!"

But Bob, never heeding his employer, stood glaring at the doomed form of the head porter.

In that one fall Cluck Dorman had had quite enough.

There was a big lump on the back of his head, and one of his shoulder blades was badly hurt, though not broken.

"Got enough, Cluck?" Brisbane demanded, quietly.

"Oh, I'll fix you, later," half-sobbed the big fellow.

"Any old time will do," Bob answered, quietly.

"Brisbane," demanded Allison, "did you hear what I said?"

"Something about going, wasn't it?" asked the boy, turning with a cool smile.

"And going quick, and staying away," fumed the employer. "I don't want anybody like you around here any longer."

"Oh, you'll see things different in a few hours," Bob asserted, positively.

"Git! There's the gate!"

"You'll let me get my hat and coat, won't you?"

"If you get them quickly enough," glared Allison.

"Oh, thank you, sir," and Bob, with another smile, and making a rather pronounced bow, sidled past the boss.

There was something in the boy's eyes, though, that made Allison draw back in half-alarm.

Upstairs, our hero stepped lightly, quickly through the counting-room to where his hat and coat hung.

"Good boy!" came several approving murmurs.

"You did it up brown—a great, good job!"

Payson and Rondick were at a sink, washing away the signs of their late encounter.

They did not turn. Brisbane gave them only one smiling look as he reached for his belongings.

Then he wheeled toward the other clerks.

"Fellows, I'm through here, so I hear," the boy announced. "Good-by and thanks to all who have been good to me, or who wanted to be."

Just a little bit of a cheer got started, but the door opened and Frederick Allison strode into the room. The cheer died.

But Bob, with his head still mighty high, walked swiftly to the door that opened on the stairs leading to the street.

He was satisfied with himself as he reached the street.

But a walk of a few blocks took most of the satisfaction away from him.

"Blazes! What'll mother think?" he quivered, a great lump rising in his throat. "That seven dollars a week came in mighty handy to her. She can't spare a cent of it, either. Now, if I start in a new place, I can't hope to get over four dollars a week. Oh, dear, it seems so fine to be cock of the walk, and to do all the crowing. That lasts for just about five minutes. Then a fellow sobers down. I don't care, for myself, but what will mother ever do?"

Right in the midst of the crowd Bob Brisbane stopped, leaning against the wall of one of the high buildings up on Tremont street.

"Whew! But this is going to be tough, if I don't get another job that pays as well!"

The tears were in his eyes now, as he thought of that worn, white-faced, suffering, patient little mother.

He was her sole support, except for the few dollars that she was now and then well enough to earn by trimming hats for her neighbors.

"We've been poor enough all along," choked the boy. "Now, we'll be like church mice. Oh, dear! Not that I'm sorry about the big kick. That was coming to me, and I had to make it, or I couldn't have held the job, anyway. But why did Allison have to get mad because I defended myself? I wonder if I couldn't square this with him? Can't I appeal to his sense of justice? He must have one—sometimes! I've heard that he isn't so bad a man when he leaves his office. Ginger! Shall I try?"

If Bob's mind was in any doubt, then his feet were settling the question for him.

For he found himself walking back toward High street.

"The old man ought to be feeling good by the time that he leaves his office," murmured the boy. "He goes about five, and it'll soon be that. Oh, dear! I've got to do something to keep that seven per!"

Bob's walk ended on High street, a bit above the Allison building. The boy stepped into a doorway from which he could watch the door through which his boss would come out.

The first person whom he saw come out was a faded little woman of middle age, dressed in dingy black.

Yet there was a look of distinction about her, despite her shabby-genteel appearance.

As she came nearer, Bob saw tears in her eyes.

Then, suddenly, she reeled.

Like a flash, the boy was across the street. He caught her, supporting her.

"Ill, madam?" he asked.

"No-o-o, I think not," replied the woman, faintly. "Just tired, I fancy. But thank you for coming to my aid. I'm stronger now."

"Haven't I seen you in Allison's office?" Bob inquired.

"Very likely. I am Mrs. Bostwick."

"Why, the firm used to be Allison & Bostwick, I've heard. Are you the former partner's wife, if I am not rude in asking?"

"I'm Roger Bostwick's widow," the woman replied, wearily. "Mr. Bostwick was Allison's partner, although Mr. Allison says not!" she added.

"Says Bostwick wasn't his partner?" queried Bob, curiously.

"Yes; that is, Mr. Allison claims that the partnership was dissolved long before it was. He's a hard man. Rightfully, there is a good deal of money coming to me. But I can't find the papers of that partnership, and so I can't get a lawyer to take up the case for me."

"It's a shame—a rank shame! That's the kind of a man Allison is, too!"

"I—I don't know why I've told you so much," cried the woman, starting suddenly, as if she had just waked up out of a trance.

"It's all right, ma'am. You're quite safe in telling me," Bob made haste to assure her.

"Do you mind helping me to my car? It passes the corner."

"And you'll be all right, then?" questioned our hero, anxiously.

"Quite all right, thank you, if I once get aboard my car."

Bob gladly escorted her to the car, then came back to resume his wait for Allison.

The street was not quite so crowded with passers-by now as it had been.

The business crowd was nearly all of the street, and it was still too early for the throngs of working people to come out of these great buildings.

"There's the boss," clicked the boy, suddenly.

Paling a bit, he started forward.

"Mr. Allison," appealed the boy, stepping up close to the man, who was walking rapidly.

"Well?" demanded the boss, wheeling, then stopping. "So it's you, you young ruffian?"

"That's rather a hard name, isn't it, sir?" asked the boy.

"You seemed bent on trouncing my whole establishment this afternoon."

"I had to make a kick, sir, to save myself. And I struck only the enemies I made by the kick."

"I don't want you, anyway," sniffed Allison. "Your pay'll be ready for you Saturday."

"Mr. Allison," urged Bob, eagerly, yet a bit stiffly, "you don't realize what that little seven dollars means to me. I don't say a word for myself. But my mother——"

"You mother!" sneered Allison.

Bob went suddenly white, but he went on:

"Yes; my mother has only me as her support. She——"
 "I'd like to see your mother!" taunted Allison. "The mother of such a boy as you——"
 "Stop!"

"I can picture her!" jeered the man. "Just such a common——"

That was as far as he got. Right then and there, at that very second, Frederick Allison was in line for a trouncing of his own.

CHAPTER II.

A BARGAIN IN GRUDGE.

And he got it.

Bob's right hand registered a "kick" on his former boss's jaw.

Another blow caught the man on the end of his rather prominent nose just as he was going down.

With a roar of mingled anger and pain, Allison tried to rise to his feet, while a crowd ran to the scene from all quarters.

Crack! A blow on the tip of the chin sent Allison back to a seat on the pavement.

"Stay there until you can be decent!" quivered Brisbane, holding himself ready to send in more "kicks."

But a man behind our hero in the crowd jerked the boy back, pinning his arms.

Bob struggled, but the man was too big for him.

"Let me go," urged the boy.

"For more fighting? Oh, no!"

"Here comes the rascal," panted Bob, as Allison, once more on his feet, came forward with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

"Are you trying to hold me so that blackguard can pound me?" panted the enraged youngster, fighting to free himself.

Allison's mean purpose was too plain. Bob's captor let him go.

"Keep off, you blackguard!" warned Bob, falling into a position of readiness.

Allison drew quickly back, the satisfied look vanishing.

"What's the row here?" demanded a policeman, pushing his way through. "Who hit you, sir?" continued the bluecoat as he caught sight of Allison's damaged face.

"That boy! That young thug!" cried the man, pointing a denouncing finger at our hero.

"What did you do it for?" demanded the officer, resting a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Am I under arrest?" demanded Bob, indignantly.

"I guess you are."

"It's time for me to butt in," announced a cold, firm voice, and a man of thirty-five, tall, fresh-faced and rosy, neatly dressed in black and wearing a glossy silk hat, stepped up to the officer's side.

"Officer, I saw the whole affair—heard what was said, too," continued the tall man. "The boy is not at fault."

"Keep out of this, can't you, Holcomb?" growled Frederick Allison.

Bob started. Holcomb was the name of Allison's keenest rival in the leather trade. This must be the man himself.

Holcomb, without favoring Allison with a look, resumed:

"Officer, the man insulted the boy's mother. That is, he reviled the mother's good name. Either you or I, officer, would pound the head off the fellow who said as much about our mothers. The boy's not to blame."

"Arrest that young wretch!" raged Allison, pressing forward and glaring at his business rival.

"I heard the whole thing, too," spoke up a quiet man in the crowd. "I back up the other witness. The boy was not to blame. He'd have been a cur if he hadn't struck out."

"Do you press the charge?" demanded the officer, favoring Allison with a not very respectful look.

"If he does," muttered Holcomb, "I'll bail the youngster out and send my own lawyer to court to defend him."

"Do you press the charge?" insisted the officer, speaking rather roughly this time.

"No-o-o," denied Allison, feebly but angrily and sullenly.

"You're not my prisoner, then," nudged the officer, releasing his hold on Brisbane's collar. "And my own notion, kid, is that you're just the right kind of ticket!"

Followed by jeers and hisses, Allison slunk rapidly away.

Some of the crowd remained to thank Bob, after our hero had thanked the officer.

Holcomb stepped back out of the way, standing close to the wall of the nearest building until the little, congratulating crowd had dispersed.

Then he called:

"Boy, come here!"

"Well, Mr. Holcomb?" Brisbane inquired, going over to the one who had saved him from trouble. "But, first of all, I want to thank you, sir."

"Thank me for nothing," retorted Mr. Holcomb, with a smile. "I'm the one who wants to thank you. I've wanted to thrash Allison many the time and oft, but he never gave me an opening. Say, you did him up well, boy, and you gave me the huge pleasure of helping you in a way. I assure you the pleasure is all mine. What's your name?"

"Robert Brisbane."

"Brisbane, you've given me so much pleasure that I want you to give me the further pleasure of taking you along to dinner with me. Will you go? We can get a famous dinner in a private room at the Parker House."

"I'm afraid I don't just look the part," protested Bob, turning red.

"Oh, we can soon fix that. In fact, Brisbane, I want to

fix everything for the youngster who helped to square me with that slimy rascal. Come on, now; let me manage things for the next two or three hours. I'll get a lot of fun out of it, and you won't be wasting your time, either."

With a great leap at the heart, Bob suddenly realized that Holcomb, head of a house in the same line of business, might be very much inclined to make up for the loss of a job by the offer of another.

"Thank you, and I'll take your advice, sir," Bob assented.

To himself he murmured:

"This is downright luck! It may prove a windfall!"

Still chatting, and in high good humor, Holcomb took the boy up on Washington street.

There, in the course of the next hour, such a change was wrought in the looks of Bob Brisbane that he simply couldn't realize his own reflection in the mirror.

He was toggged out, from head to foot, in the best that this clothing store contained.

More than that, with the old things, that were to go to Bob's little home out in Melrose, a supply of linen, underwear and neckties was added.

Near the door of the store Mr. Holcomb stopped to buy a small, neat pocketbook.

Into this he folded away a brand-new twenty-dollar bill.

"Carfare," he smiled, tucking it into Bob's inner pocket.

"Now, for that dinner!"

But in the lobby of the Parker House Brisbane thought of one thing that had escaped the other.

"I must send word to my mother," he pleaded. "I must telegraph her, or she'll be worried at my not coming home."

"Good boy!" nodded Holcomb, pointing. "You can send a wire right over there."

So Bob wrote his mother's address on a yellow blank, and right below it these words:

"Detained on important business."

"I hope I can make that good," sighed the boy. Then he turned to follow his host to the elevator.

Such a wonderful dinner as was served to them upstairs Bob had sometimes heard about, but had never sat down to.

And before it had gone far his host had brought out the whole story of the boy's troubles with Allison.

"He's served me many a dirty trick," muttered Holcomb. "I wish I had had the fun of getting square with him as well as you did. I'd like to—well, as the boys say, 'just soak him!'"

"Somebody ought to," Brisbane assented.

Then, suddenly, he remembered that weak, faded little woman whom he had talked with a little while before.

"Excuse me, Mr. Holcomb," broke in Bob, "but did you ever know anything about Mr. Bostwick, Allison's partner?"

"About all I know is that there was some such party," replied Holcomb. "That was before I came into the business in Boston. Why?"

Brisbane described the meeting of the afternoon. "That's just like Allison's dirty tricks," commented the host. "I'm willing to guarantee that the woman's story is straight."

"It's too bad she can't find a way to force Allison to settle with her," Bob cried, warmly.

"It certainly is. But don't you suppose, Brisbane, that something could be found out from past records?"

"If the woman had the money to hire a lawyer, or some one," our hero rejoined. "But I'm certain that Mrs. Bostwick hasn't any money for that sort of thing. Now, see here, Mr. Holcomb, nobody would like better than I to find out all about this, and be the means of making Allison settle with the woman. But I haven't the money for the expense of finding out."

"I have," replied the host, musingly.

"Just the point!" cried Bob. "I'd like to put in the services, if someone would put in the money. I feel sure I could find out something. Are you—are you——"

"Am I willing to put up the cash?" smiled Holcomb. "Well, now, I don't know. What would it cost to make a start on the job—enough of a start to get a look at the chances on the case?"

"Put me on it, at the start, anyway," proposed our hero, eagerly, "and I'll work for the same I've been getting—seven dollars a week."

"We'll call it ten," returned Mr. Holcomb, after a few minutes of thought. "And I'll stand all reasonable expense, too. We can try it for a week or two, anyway, and see what you can find out. Yes; I'll risk the try, and the cash to fry, if you'll pledge your word to keep my name out of it."

The dinner was over now. Holcomb was leaning back, smoking a cigar.

He rang for a waiter and ordered a directory brought.

Mrs. Bostwick lives on upper Shawmut avenue, right in a shabby-genteel lodging-house section," Holcomb remarked, writing down the address on a slip of paper, which he handed to our hero. "It's early. Suppose you run up there now and see what there is in the case. If you're not smart enough to get the woman to talking freely, then you're not smart enough to go any further on the case, anyway. Tell you what, Brisbane! Telephone me at the Algonquin Club when you've got a report to make. And now I'm off, and glad to have run across you youngster. Keep track of me, and, if you do anything good, you'll not be sorry. Oh, I forgot—expense money."

A few more banknotes came into sight, which the astonished youngster nervously tucked away in his new pocket-book.

Five minutes later Brisbane found himself on a street car, whirling away up towards the Roxbury section of Boston.

"Is this real life?" throbbed the boy. "Oh, say!"

Yet he pinched himself, to make doubly sure that he was awake.

"No dream!" he chuckled, gleefully. "And getting

paid for trying to run old Allison down! Yet I never had a grudge against him until he started in to say lying things about my mother. And he never even saw that sweet old soul."

Bob's face darkened as he remembered that encounter in High street.

Frederick Allison would have slept much worse that night had he had any inkling of how savage an enemy he had made.

"Oh, wouldn't I like to do the job up brown?" quivered the youngster. "Allison worships money, too. It'll be grand if Mrs. Bostwick can only be helped to make him hand out a hundred thousand or two!"

But these were only dreams—visions! Bob's face darkened as soon as he realized the fact.

"If there's any possible way," he gritted, clenching his hands.

In course of time he found himself at the address given in the directory—a rather dingy, three-story building.

When the door opened in answer to his ring, Bob almost started back.

Certainly, he felt as if his breath must leave him.

For the door had been opened by a radiant vision of girlish prettiness.

About sixteen she looked to be, handsomely moulded, tall and slender—a black-haired girl with gleaming black eyes.

Her dress, though very plain, didn't look dingy.

Nothing could look shabby or dingy on such a girl, Bob decided in a flash.

"Whom do you want to see?" the girl asked, looking at the boy who had been suddenly struck silent.

"Mrs. Rogers," quivered Bob. "Oh—er—I mean—Mrs. Roger Bostwick. Can I see her, please?"

"About renting a room?" asked the girl, moving aside for him to enter.

"Then Mrs. Bostwick runs this place," Bob discovered, taking in, in a flash, the worn appearance of things in the hallway. "Poor soul!"

"Yes."

"I—I want to see her on business, please," the boy explained.

"Then step in here," requested the girl, smiling and cool. "I'll tell mamma."

Bob stepped into the parlor and sat down. Then he looked curiously about him.

The little parlor wasn't exactly shabby. That is, a brave attempt had been made to make things look fresh and fairly new.

A swish of skirts at the doorway.

Then there entered the same faded little woman whom he had seen that afternoon on High street.

"My daughter told me that you wished to see me?" hinted Mrs. Bostwick, in her sweet, low, weary voice.

She did not recognize our much-changed hero until he explained where and how he had met her.

Now, with all the eloquence at his command, Bob Brisbane launched into his object.

He told the astonished woman that there was money waiting to be used in the defence of her rights, if only she could furnish the clues that would make it possible to establish those rights.

It was plain that she doubted; natural that she should be suspicious over any such amazing offer.

But our hero stuck splendidly to his guns.

"Now, Mrs. Bostwick," he urged, "I can't tell you who has employed me on this wonderful, glorious, splendid work. But I can tell you what you can do to reassure yourself. Come out to Melrose with me to-morrow, and there, among the people who've always known me, you can find out whether I'm reckoned as straight or crooked."

But his own glowing, ardent face, and the look of entire honesty that gleamed in his eyes, had their effect on the woman.

By degrees she thawed. At last Bob was deep in the story of her husband's defrauded partnership with Frederick Allison.

"Madam," quivered the boy at last, "I don't know a heap about law. But I'm sure there's a way to prove your husband's rights, now that there is money ready for the investigating and the fighting. I can't say much more to-night until I've seen Mr. Hol— I mean, until I've seen the lawyer of the folks behind me. But I'll rush all I can. And you'll trust me, won't you?"

"I—I think I shall have to. Yes, certainly," smiled the woman, though there were tears just behind the smile.

"And you'll let me run in as often as I need to see you, won't you?" suggested the boy, rising and holding out his hand.

"Why, surely," she answered, as if in some surprise.

"I may have to run in pretty often, then," flashed through the boy's mind as the memory of that pretty face and tall, slender young figure rose before him.

"Clara has gone out, or I'm sure she'd be glad to meet you," went on the woman.

So Bob had one more bit of information for which he was thankful. He knew her name.

Then, in a transport of joy, the boy hurried to the nearest telephone station, and got Mr. Holcomb on the wire.

"It sounds good—really good," was that gentleman's comment. "Come to see me at noon to-morrow. Come here to the club, too, for Allison doesn't belong here."

It was an excited but sweet night's sleep that Bob Brisbane got when he tumbled into bed, late, on that wonderful night

CHAPTER III.

SOMEONE EATS HIS PECK OF DIRT.

"For a kid, I'm rather well pleased with myself."

That was what Bob Brisbane told his mother about a week later.

"You mustn't get too large a notion of yourself all at once, Robert," his mother smiled.

"You don't know the business exactly, mother, and so you can't judge whether I've done exactly well."

"You've told me that Mr. Allison used you very shamefully, and discharged you, and that someone else, who has interests against Mr. Allison's, has employed you on some confidential work."

"That's it, mother," Bob nodded.

"It's honest work, of course, and so I don't need to worry or feel afraid of having to be ashamed," pursued Mrs. Brisbane.

"No, mother; you'll never have to feel ashamed of what I've done so far. In fact, I hope you'll be rather proud later on."

From which it will be seen that our hero was a good enough business man to keep his own counsel in whatever he undertook for others.

To-day Bob was at home for the simple reason that his work for Holcomb had come to a standstill.

It would be another day or two before his employer's lawyer could advise as to the next step to be taken.

Briefly, the case, as far as it had developed, was this:

Roger Bostwick had been dead ten years.

Twenty years before he had been a junior partner of Allison's.

By degrees, Bostwick had made himself more and more valuable.

At the time of his death Roger Bostwick owned a one-third interest in the business of the great leather house.

But, after his death, the only partnership paper that could be found was the old, original partnership paper that called for but a tenth interest in the business.

Right after the death of Bostwick a fire, set or caused to be set, undoubtedly by Allison, had destroyed all of the firm's books that had any bearing on the matter.

And so the widow had been forced into taking a price that represented a tenth of the firm's assets.

Roger Bostwick had always lived well.

Hence the money grudgingly paid to the widow by Frederick Allison had sufficed only to pay Bostwick's debts and to leave a small margin that had been invested by the widow in a lodging-house.

Mrs. Bostwick, knowing well enough, though unable to prove, her husband's larger interest in the firm, had often tried to induce Allison to do her justice.

But now Holcomb's lawyer was behind the case, with Bob doing most of the investigating.

An important part of the case hinged around the record of a sale of real estate by the firm some twelve years before.

This record of the deed would help to clear the briers that stood in the path of Mrs. Bostwick's investigators.

And Bob, only the day before, had found the record of that deed in the county records.

He had been copying it, in fact, when Allison had arrived there.

Allison inquired for the volume.

"That young man has it," replied the clerk in the county office.

Bob had turned around, with a start, to find Frederick Allison staring at him.

But Allison's own start was the greater.

Brisbane's ex-boss hurriedly left the room.

But he made inquiries and learned that Bob had been looking up the record to that very deed.

And now our hero, having turned the copy of the deed over to Holcomb's lawyer, was taking a day off at home to await further orders.

It was the meeting with Allison in the record office that particularly pleased the boy.

"It'll get Allison uneasy at once," was the way Hodgson, Holcomb's lawyer, had put it. "If Allison thinks we are getting on his trail he'll get nervous and be in a better frame of mind for settling."

So, since the lawyer was pleased, Bob was pleased, too.

"If we can only get the thing through," sighed the boy.

"If I do really help, Holcomb will be sure to give me some sort of good position in his office. He isn't the kind of fellow to forget those who please him. And Clara will be so grateful, too."

For Clara had met our hero twice since that first meeting at the front door.

On neither occasion had she talked long with the boy.

But she knew the nature of his business, and her interest in Bob Brisbane's success was naturally enormous.

"I'd like to know what that coarse brute, Allison, is thinking about to-day," chuckled our hero.

He was sitting by the front door of the little five-room cottage, out in the suburbs of Melrose.

The cottage was a one-story affair, with a tiny attic.

Less than half an acre of ground lay around the house as a part of the place.

Mrs. Brisbane had gone out into the yard to potter away at her little flower-beds. Bob followed to watch, and, if wanted, to help.

"Is that messenger boy coming here?" asked Mrs. Brisbane, rising to look. "I hope it's not bad news."

"More likely a telegram from Hodgson," mused Bob to himself, going down to the gate to meet the boy.

The telegram was for himself. Our hero gave a start as he read the signature of Allison.

This was the text of the message:

"Need you at our office. Past forgotten. Come at once."

"Oho!" throbbed the boy.

"Any answer?" queried the messenger boy.

"No."

Then, after showing the telegram to his mother without comment, the youngster sat down again to think it over.

"Allison is getting afraid. He wants me where he can make it worth my while to keep my mouth shut after I'm

told him a few things. What answer shall I send? Or shall I send none? I don't want to make any breaks!"

For a half an hour Bob thought it over anxiously.

Then he walked into town, where he sent this telegram to his former employer:

"If you want to see me, you can find me here to-night. May be away after that. If you are coming to-night, wire at once to that effect."

This Bob sent off "collect." Then he turned homeward, chuckling.

Nor had he been at home a great while when the messenger reappeared. He brought a message from Allison, which read:

"Shall see you to-night."

"Good enough," chuckled the boy. "Oh, won't it be fun seeing what that old brute's game is."

But to his mother Brisbane explained:

"You'd better call somewhere to-night, mother. Allison is a foul-mouthed brute sometimes. I don't want you to hear his language."

So by seven o'clock in the evening Mrs. Brisbane was away. Bob held forth alone.

Daylight faded, dark coming on. Still no sign of Allison.

"He's gotten cagey, after all," murmured Bob, disappointedly. "Oh, I did want the fun of laughing at him."

As he sat there, out in the dark front yard, it struck the boy how lonely the spot was. There were no houses close by and few passersby along this road.

"Mother'll be out until ten. That leaves a fellow rather lonesome," yawned Bob.

But his jaws closed with a snap suddenly. Down the road heavy footsteps sounded.

Could this be Frederick Allison? Bob listened. Then he made out the broad figure of a man approaching the gate.

"Does Robert Brisbane live here?" demanded a familiar voice.

"He does. Walk in, Mr. Allison."

The gate was swung open. Allison, dressed with a little more care than usual, came up the path, swinging a rather heavy cane.

"Howdy, Brisbane," nodded the merchant.

"Howdy," Bob returned, drily, and, rising, pushed forward a chair on the grass.

"It's cooler out here, Mr. Allison," suggested the boy.

"Company in the house?" asked the merchant, glancing at the light through the windows.

"Not a soul," Bob replied, with pretended listlessness. "Even my mother had an appointment out for to-night."

"Brisbane," began the merchant, dropping his voice to a low, confidential tone, as he dropped on to the chair, "can't you come back to my office?"

"Why do you want me?" asked the boy, curtly.

"Well, er—er—we're short of the right kind of clerks. And you're a good one."

"Come right to the point, Mr. Allison. You didn't come out here because you really need me on your office force. Come right to the point, and out with the truth, or I shall be yawning again."

"Brisbane, what are you doing these days?"

"Why, that's my business, Mr. Allison. And, if there's anything you want to know it'll be best to come right to the point and not waste any time fishing. Understand?"

Bob was getting huge satisfaction out of tormenting this former boss.

For a few moments Allison chewed at the end of his cigar. Then, of a sudden, he demanded, almost in a whisper:

"Brisbane, are you working any game against—well, against my interests in any way?"

"I told you before that I declined to discuss my business in any way. Tell me just what you want, and I'll tell you whether I'll answer."

"Brisbane, will you come back into my office and work for my interests in every way, if I pay you twenty dollars a week?"

"No," Bob retorted, simply.

"For twenty-five, then?"

"No."

Allison rose to his feet, wheeled and glared at the boy.

"You've answered me—all I need to know!" the merchant grated, harshly. "You're working against me, and getting well paid for it. Else you'd jump at an offer of three times what you're worth."

"Well?" demanded Bob, mockingly. He, too, had risen.

"You take a lot of delight out of tormenting me, don't you?" glared Allison.

"I do," Bob retorted coolly. "I get all the pleasure there is in baiting a blackguard!"

"Be careful!" warned Allison, lifting his cane threateningly.

"Bosh!" snapped the boy. "I'm not afraid of you!"

He spoke with such evident truthfulness, with such a sense of power, and with so much of mockery that Allison's conscience reeled.

Maddened, the merchant did what he had not thought of doing before.

Raising the cane like a flash, Allison brought it down on the boy's head.

Down to the grass, like a clod, went our hero, and did not move.

With a cry, half of rage and half of fear, Allison, drawing a short sword-blade out of the cane, bent over the boy.

CHAPTER IV.

"OVER THE FENCE IS OUT OF LUCK!"

For an instant Allison, after bending over, with the bared blade of the sword cane raised, recoiled.

"What have I been doing?" he asked of himself in swift alarm. "It would be fearful to be arrested for murder! Yet I am sure he is trying to expose and send me to prison a ruined man!"

He listened, but could hear no other human being near them.

"I might do it safely, after all!" throbbed the wretch. "No one could prove I had been here. I could show up at the railroad station, ask the way here, and hire someone to bring me out here. Then we could discover the crime, and I wouldn't be suspected."

Crime! The word gave the brutish merchant a shiver for just an instant.

It wasn't the thought of crime itself, though, but the dread of punishment.

"I can do it safely," he assured himself. "One or two good thrusts—then weight the cane and sink it in the river. The boy, finished, will be one foe out of my way! It'll be a warning to the others, too!"

Again he listened for sounds of anyone coming that way.

All the while Bob lay without stirring.

"I can do it—and I will do it!" quivered Allison, his mind made up for the fearful deed at last. "He is in the pay of an enemy of mine, and it is my business to get rid of my enemies."

Bending over once more, Allison, gripping the handle of the sword cane, looked for what might be the best spot into which to thrust the steel.

"Good evening!" hailed a curious voice from behind.

With a gasp of terror the merchant wheeled around, staring wildly toward the gate, from which direction the voice had seemed to come.

Drawing in his breath sharply, Allison bent forward to get a better look out into the darkness.

Flop! Crafty Bob Brisbane was upon his feet in a jiffy. Allison heard the sound of this movement.

But, ere the merchant could turn or move, Bob had pounced upon his enemy's right wrist, wrenching the sword cane from him.

Back a couple of steps sprang Bob, laughing hugely.

"Fooled you, did I?" taunted the boy. "Come on and take this away from me if you can!"

"What are you talking about?" faltered the merchant.

"Guess!" came the crisp retort.

"What do you mean by drawing a weapon on me?" blustered Allison, growing suddenly bold.

It was Bob's turn to gasp.

"What?" he panted.

"Drop that weapon, you young scoundrel!"

"So you can pick it up?" mocked the boy at bay.

"If you don't drop that weapon I shall shout for help. You young assassin!"

"Eh?" palpitated Bob.

He dropped now. The merchant, thinking someone else was near, was trying to fasten the charge of assault upon his former clerk.

Then, just as suddenly, Bob began to chuckle.

Allison stared at him.

"What's so funny, you young murderer?" he snarled.

"You're talking for effect, so as to make it look as if I had been threatening you," grinned Bob. "You big chump! Didn't you ever hear of ventriloquism?"

"Ven——" exploded Allison, wonderingly. "Did you——"

"I've had a lot of fun with the art," mocked Bob. "Look out what you hear when you're around me. When you knocked me down I don't know whether you stunned me or not. But I opened one eye just in time to see you bending over, looking as if you meant to stick this steel skewer into me. So I jobbed you. Listen!"

"Surrender, in the name of the law!"

The merchant started, in spite of himself. Though he saw the boy's lips moving, the sound seemed to come from behind, down by the road.

"You see how you got jobbed!" mocked Bob. "But we understand each other now, Allison. We can't do any real business together—you and I. So—just fade! Skiddoo!"

"Eh? What?"

"Twenty-three!"

Allison still looked as if he didn't understand.

"A taste of your own medicine!" mocked the boy.

Swift as thought, he danced around his former employer.

Prod! That sharp point of steel went in through the seat of Allison's trousers.

"Ouch!" roared the startled one. "You young——"

"Skiddoo! Beat it!" urged Bob, still dancing around his enemy. "Git—while you've got a chance!"

Prod! Brisbane inflicted another jab. It must have sunk quite a little way into the flesh.

Quivering, angered, yet afraid, now, of the light that danced in the boy's eyes, Allison suddenly turned and raced for the gate.

But Bob headed him off, then veered.

Prod! For the third time that steel sank in at the back of the merchant's trousers, piercing the flesh just enough to be felt disagreeably.

And now the enemy was in full, frantic retreat.

Down the yard raced the merchant, with Bob in full pursuit, but not taking too great pains to win in the race.

Gaining a bit, Allison braced both hands on the fence. Allison did his best to vault the fence.

He succeeded in getting over, though he landed in a heap on one shoulder on the sidewalk beyond.

"Oh, I'll have more fun with you yet!" mocked the boy.

Bob, too, rested his hands on the fence, ready to vault.

But Allison, with a muffled yell, sprang up and took to his feet as if for dear life.

Nor did Bob, once over the fence, try to pursue the man who had vanished into the darkness down the road.

"I've had my fun," chuckled the boy. "It's no great use trying to rub it in. Hullo!"

His eye fell on something white that lay on the side-

walk by the fence, close to the point where his former boss had toppled over.

It was a long, businesslike-looking envelope.

Bob had it in his hands in a twinkling.

The envelope contained some sort of papers.

"Owner can have it by proving property and paying charges," mocked the boy, softly, under his breath.

Leisurely enough he turned down toward the gate, muttering smilingly to himself:

"Over the fence is out—out of luck! Oh, I hope old Allison dropped something that he'll miss!"

In the yard Brisbane stopped long enough to pick up the discarded part of the sword-cane.

Fitting the two together, he entered the house, standing the sword-cane in the corner.

Then toward the light he went, scanning the envelope.

Its surface was plain.

"What's inside, anyway?" wondered the boy.

He took out two papers, spread them out and looked at them intently.

Then he vented a half-smothered laugh.

"Allison didn't hesitate to have these with him, for he never looked for what happened. But his trip was mighty well worth while—for me! Papers, and just the kind we want for proving the Bostwick case against him! Oh, if this isn't luck!"

Bob Brisbane fairly danced about the little room.

"Thank you, Mr. Allison—oh, thank you, indeed!" he chuckled.

CHAPTER V.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY.

What the papers were shall appear presently.

It suffices to say now that, though they were not enough to prove Mrs. Bostwick's case against Frederick Allison, yet these same papers, which the merchant had never looked to drop in the way he had done, were a big help in our hero's case.

Before going to bed that night young Brisbane took mighty good pains to hide both papers and sword-cane where no night prowler could have a chance to find them.

In the morning he reported his new find to Lawyer Hodgson over the telephone.

"Good work," answered Lawyer Hodgson's voice over the 'phone.

"Shall I bring the papers in to you?"

"No. If Allison has any suspicion about us, he'll be having my office watched to see who comes here. Put the papers away safely. Mail me copies of the papers, and then put the originals away where they can't be lost or stolen."

"And what shall I do next?" Bob inquired.

"Wait where you are until you get orders from me," came the lawyer's instructions.

"Shall I see Mrs. Bostwick?" Bob queried.

"By no means," the lawyer replied. "Her house may be watched, too. We don't want to give the enemy any real points. Our game is to keep him guessing, without letting him find out anything."

"Shall I write Mrs. Bostwick, then?"

"Not by a long shot! The letter might fall into someone else's hands."

"That's reasonable enough," Bob muttered to himself. "But it's just a bit tough not to be allowed near Mrs. Bostwick's house, when I've particular reasons for wanting to go."

"Just wait where you are for orders," came the lawyer's final instructions. "It ought to be easy enough to loaf on pay. Of course, if anything turns up suddenly and unexpectedly you'll have to use your best good sense, and let me know at once."

"Of course."

"That's all. Good-by."

"Why, isn't it splendid to have a position where you don't have to work all the time?" cried Mrs. Brisbane when Bob, returning from the telephone office in Melrose, told his mother a part of his news.

"Sometimes," smiled the boy. "But just now, I'd a heap rather work."

For the rest of the day there seemed nothing left but to go fishing.

It was a bit slow, but a rest isn't so bad after all.

"The best of it is," reflected the boy, as he sat on the shaded bank of the stream and watched his float; "the best of it is that, in the end, there seems to be a mighty good chance now to beat old Allison out. Mrs. Bostwick has promised me a good reward, if I win for her. And if I do Holcomb will be so mightily tickled that he'll give me the best he can in his office. Altogether, Bob Brisbane, old boy, if you keep your head—and don't let it get swelled, either—you're likely started on your way to owning some of the good things of life!"

With that thought, our hero fished on more lazily and more contentedly.

He even had the luck to land three fair-sized perch before the afternoon shadows lengthened out.

He was about preparing to start for home, when a voice from behind broke in:

"This, I think, must be young Brisbane. Your mother said I'd find you here."

Bob had quickly wheeled about. He found himself looking at a man of perhaps thirty-three years or so of age.

This stranger was but a little under six feet, lanky, a bit awkward-looking, and with sandy hair and mustache.

He looked as if he might be an average clerk.

"You seem to know my name," Bob observed, still eyeing the other.

"Ought to," smiled the stranger. "I've had your description dinged into me."

"What can I do for you?"

"Read this."

It was a short note, in a fine feminine hand, and read:

"Trust the bearer, and do what he suggests. Do not come to the house before starting, as I fear the place is being watched. Do not try to communicate with me until you have put my business through with Mr. Nichols, who brings this, and who is an old and trusted friend.

"HELEN BOSTWICK."

Bob stared curiously at the letter, turning it over and staring at it again.

"That's the writing of Clara's mother, all right," he mused. "I know, for I've seen some of her writing. But what on earth can this mean?"

Nichols, in the meantime, had not spoken, but stood looking out over the water.

"Well," asked Bob, at last, "what's the business?"

"Can we talk safely here?" Nichols demanded, cautiously, glancing all around him through the bushes.

"I don't believe there's anyone within earshot."

"Let's get out on the road. There we can talk and be sure that no one is listening."

Bob nodded. He was keeping cool, as far as outward appearances went, but he was wondering with all his might what business Nichols could have with him.

So far Clara's mother had not attempted to take any charge of her business, but had left it wholly to the care of Bob, of Holman and of Hodgson.

The two walked together until they came to the road. There, on a little bridge, after first glancing under the structure, Nichols began to speak.

"You'll think I'm mighty cautious," laughed the lanky man; "but, on business of this kind, it pays to be."

Bob nodded.

"Mrs. Bostwick," began the lanky one, in a cautious whisper, "has an idea that Allison had certain papers bearing on her case."

"She has, eh?" asked Bob, giving no sign, though Nichols was watching our hero's face closely.

"Yes, and she believes, further, that Allison lost those very papers."

"Where did she get that notion?"

"Because Allison has been trying, by a roundabout course, to get those papers away from her."

"He has?"

Still our hero was careful to give no sign.

"Those papers," Nichol continued, "were signed by both Allison and Bostwick, and relate to some sales of the firm's interests. In other words, those papers would go a long way toward establishing Mrs. Bostwick's claims as to the real nature of the partnership."

"I should say they might," Bob admitted, slowly.

Nichols looked at him sharply, in disappointment.

"See here, Brisbane, don't you trust me?"

Bob looked candidly at his questioner.

"Mr. Nichols, before I can answer a question like that, I want to know what you want me to trust you in?"

"You've read Mrs. Bostwick's note to you?"

"Yes; and I have it still."

"She advises you to trust me."

"Mrs. Bostwick commands me to trust you, in fact."

"Then, why don't you do it?"

"For this very simply reason, Mr. Nichols. Mrs. Bostwick has been put in a tight fix before by people she trusted. I'm going to look out for her this time."

"Then I'm afraid you won't let me help you at present," murmured the lanky one, his face clouding.

"You can explain anything you want to, and I'll answer you," Bob replied, slowly.

"Mrs. Bostwick," pursued Nichols, "is quite convinced that Allison has lost the papers that he prized so highly."

"You told me that before."

"Now, if Allison has lost them, why, Mrs. Bostwick figures that, most likely, since you are on the fellow's trail, that the papers have dropped into your possession."

"That's most ingenious of Mrs. Bostwick," Bob murmured.

Nichols wheeled, facing him squarely.

"Brisbane, I'm in a position to be of great service to Mrs. Bostwick, who is my friend and your friend, too. I ask you have you or have you not those papers?"

"That's a pretty big question," smiled Bob.

Nichols gave a snort of impatience.

"I can't go any further with you, Brisbane, unless you're candid with me."

"You haven't told me yet why you want to know."

"Because," replied Nichols, moodily, "if I can get hold of the papers we're speaking of, I know where to get hold of other papers to compare. The other papers of which I speak would complete the chain of evidence so that Allison wouldn't have a leg to stand on. That's why I want to see the papers that I believe you have. If you won't meet me half way, I shall have to report to Mrs. Bostwick that you balked, and then I shall be obliged to drop out of the case."

"Not at all," Bob objected. "If you can lay your hands on another set of papers, such as you speak of, you can bring them to me——"

"But I can't. They're on file at a certain law office, and I can't take them past the door of that room."

"Oh?" mused Bob, looking at his companion. "Where is that law office?"

"In New York City—on lower Broadway, to be more exact."

Bob thought a few moments.

"Nichols, is there anything to prevent my going to New York with you?"

The other brightened up a good deal.

"Of course not," he replied, eagerly. "That will settle the whole difficulty."

"Very good, Nichols. I can go to New York with you."

"But not without the papers that you have."

"That is, assuming that I really have any."

Nichols threw up his hands with a gesture of despair.

"There you go again, Brisbane! And after I've brought you a message that I thought would throw you wide open, as it ought to."

"I'm doing what I think best—just as you are."

"You'll go to New York with me, then?" persevered Nichols.

Bob reflected on this. It was too late in the day to get Hodgson over the telephone wire. He was debarred from going to see Mrs. Bostwick. Holcomb, who wanted only results, and who was not bothering with the details, would not be likely to give any advice in the matter.

"Yes; I'll go to New York with you," said Bob, at last, when he had thought it all over.

"To-night? So that we can be there to-morrow morning?"

"Yes. It may as well be to-night as any other time."

"And the papers that you have——"

"Assuming that I have any."

"You'll take them on with you?"

"I'll tell you just what I'll do," returned our hero, fencing carefully. "If I have any such papers as you suggest, then I'll agree that they shall be in New York early to-morrow morning. It will be none of your concern as to just how the papers get there—assuming that I have some."

"You've promised!" demanded Nichols, anxiously, pleadingly. "You will keep your word?"

"I always keep my word," retorted our hero, bluntly.

"And those papers will be on hand, to compare them with those that I show you?"

"Yes; if I have any."

"On your honor?"

Bob looked offended.

"I've already given you my word," he answered, a bit stiffly.

"Pardon me," urged Nichols. "But this is a matter of more importance to me than you can understand. But you've given your word, and I'll accept it."

* * * * *

The midnight train took the young men from Boston.

They alighted at the Grand Central Depot early the next morning.

All the way Nichols had proved himself to be a most agreeable traveling companion.

Now, he proposed that they go to breakfast together, as it was much too early to go downtown to a lawyer's office.

So the pair breakfasted in the restaurant of a hotel across the street.

"There's no use in hustling," commented Nichols, as he lighted a cigar and leaned back after the meal. "My learned friend of the law reaches his office at eight o'clock, but he always wants time to go over his mail before he can talk with anyone."

"I hope our errand isn't going to prove a fool-chase," remarked Brisbane.

"That depends altogether on you, my boy. You're the only fellow who can make it a wild-geese chase."

"I'll do my part," promised our hero.

"Let's stop talking about it, then," begged Nichols.

"The confounded thing is getting on my nerves—I'm so anxious."

But at last the lanky one declared that it was time for the start.

Taking the car downtown, they had at the end of their ride a walk of less than half a block.

"Here we are," announced Nichols at last, as he stopped in front of one of the tall sky-scrapers. "We'll go up on the elevator. But I hope, Brisbane, that you haven't been fooling me; that you can produce the papers."

"Such papers as I have," smiled our hero, and tapping his breast pocket, "are in here."

"Now, that's good enough! That's all right!" cried Nichols, in a relieved voice.

They went up in the elevator to one of the upper floors. Then Nichols stopped before a door on which was painted the firm name of Wright & Steinbach.

Nor did Bob notice that the paint was very fresh.

A bell rang as they passed in through the open doorway.

Out came a dapper-looking young man, who eyed the visitors in this outer office.

It was the ordinary outer office of a lawyer, the kind of a room that visitors wait in.

"Is Mr. Wright here?" asked Nichols.

"I think so, sir," the clerk answered.

"Ask him how soon he can see Mr. Nichols and a friend."

"Very good, sir. Take seats."

The dapper young man placed two chairs, the first for Bob, and the hero seated himself.

But Nichols remained on his feet, going over to one of the windows to look out.

As for the dapper young man, he disappeared.

Not for a moment did our hero have any misgivings—not until a quick step sounded from behind, and a strong pair of lanky arms shot suddenly around his neck from behind.

Hug! Nichols was fairly choking the wind out of the boy, strangling him until our hero's brain swam.

Like a savage, Bob fought to get out of his fix.

But, held close to the chair, and fast losing consciousness, he was no match for his assailant.

As in a dream, he saw the door opposite him open again.

Out darted the dapper young man, his eyes gleaming with the wicked work in hand.

"The papers!" Bob heard Nichols' voice cry hoarsely, though the voice now sounded far away. "You'll find them in his inner breast pocket."

Wrench! The dapper young man's trembling hand was thrust in under Bob Brisbane's coat.

"Here are the papers—safe!" he cried, holding up a long envelope before the gloating eyes of the lanky one.

CHAPTER VI.

CHECKMATE.

"Slip a gag in his mouth! I don't want to kill him—not now, anyway," whispered Nichols.

Laying down the envelope, the dapper young man brought out from one of his pockets a wad of cloth.

This was forced into the now unconscious boy's mouth, and tied there.

Next, with the swiftness of those long practised in the art, Nichols and his accomplice bound Bob in ship-shape fashion.

But Brisbane was not far gone. He came back to a knowledge of his surroundings just as they finished tying him.

"Prop him in that arm-chair," ordered Nichols.

Between them they lifted Brisbane to the arm-chair, taking a turn of the rope around his body and making him fast to the chair.

"And now for the papers!" cried Nichols, exultantly. Bob opened his eyes to take in the scene.

With trembling fingers, Nichols tore off the end of the envelope, brought out, and stared at—

A thick wad of plain paper on which not a line had been written!

With a gasp, the rascal turned the sheets over fast. But not a thing was there save blank paper.

Quivering with rage, and his face a ghastly greenish color, the lanky one wheeled upon Bob Brisbane.

That youth, gagged as he was, was laughing heartily with his eyes.

"So you tricked us, eh?" quavered the lanky one. "Oh, a dear trick it will prove for you!"

The dapper young man seemed wholly speechless with disappointment.

He caught the wad of paper as it fluttered from Nichols's hands, and stood looking at the useless stationery with an utterly hopeless look.

"The reckoning will come for you all right!" uttered Nichols, savagely, shaking his fist before our hero's laughing eyes. "Oh, it was first-rate to play such a trick on me, but now the settling time has to come. Wait!"

"Search him all over," hinted the dapper young man, coming at last out of his daze.

"What for?" glowered Nichols.

"For the papers."

"Humph! This youngster is too slick to have anything of the sort about him."

"Search, just the same."

This they did, even to taking off the boy's shoes.

More than sixty dollars that they found in his pockets they divided before his face.

They explored for a money belt and for a hidden pouch, but their main search was a useless one.

Bob had brought the papers with him, as he had promised—but in his head.

And there they were thoroughly safe from discovery.

"Shall we make him tell where the papers really are?" asked the dapper young man, doubtfully.

"Huh! What's the use?" sneered the lanky one. "He'd send us on another fool chase, as big as this one was."

He turned just in time to catch a fleeting smile in Bob's eyes that confirmed that idea.

"What shall we do with him, then?" asked the dapper one.

"Teach him how to kiss himself good-by!" uttered Nichols, in a rage that was growing every minute.

Bob began to quiver inwardly.

He knew what a desperate gang he was up against.

"Kiss myself good-by?" he shivered. "Does that mean that they're going to put me out of the way for good?"

The dapper man went past him and out of sight.

Unable to turn, our hero could not see what that interesting young man was doing.

Yet the answer came soon enough.

Something white—a towel, folded, passed before the boy's face.

Then the air was full of a disgustingly sweet, stifling odor.

"Chloroform!" throbbed the now terrified boy. "Then they do mean to kill me?"

Back against his nostrils came the towel, its sweet, stifling smell causing things to fade before his eyes.

For just a brief instant Bob Brisbane tried to fight, bound as he was, for all there was in him.

But chloroform won.

The world faded, and he knew no more.

* * * * *

Yet he did not die.

When Bob first realized anything again, there was plenty of air about him, and of the sweetest kind.

There was a swaying and a rocking—something soothing about the motion, whatever it was.

Moreover, there was a straining and a creaking sound—a medley of them.

And the hurried passing of heavily-shod feet.

"Haul in that fore-sheet! Lively now! Make fast! Aloft, you, and shake out the topsail!"

Then Bob began to know where he was.

The fresh air, too, was waking up his senses.

He opened his eyes, and knew the kind of life into which he had dropped.

He was on a big, four-masted schooner, seated on the deck, nearly amidships, with his back to the bulwarks.

Out on the dark ocean—somewhere! The crew, of whom a few were visible, were rushing about, paying no heed to this boy.

"How the deuce——" gasped Bob, but stopped.

It was all too much for his still somewhat tangled mind. He remembered that supposed law office.

He remembered Nichols and the dapper one, too—and the chloroform.

So this was the way in which they had disposed of him? "Whew!"

Bob tried to get upon his feet, clutching at the rail.

Though there was a swell on the water, it was not rough, but billowy.

So, at last, the boy got upon his feet.

He stood looking about him, in a still half-dazed way.

Nowhere, on either side, could he make out a light of any kind away from the vessel—nothing but the stars overhead.

"Hey, there, you lubber!" called out a gruff voice from further astern. "Coming out of your grog, are you? Hustle forward, and the mate'll put you to work."

But Bob, making out that the speaker was standing on the cabin-top, started astern, instead, clutching at the rail as he went.

"Forward, I told you, you lubber!" roared the gruff voice.

"But I want——"

"Forward!"

"I've got to——"

"Forward!"

"Not until you've explained this all to me," cried Brisbane, desperately. "How do I come to be out here at sea? What does it all mean?"

"Forward, I tell you! I'll lay my fist against you in a second, if you don't start."

The speaker, a big, broad-shouldered man of middle age, with face of the reddest and clothes of the bluest, had now leaped down from the roof of the cabin.

He came forward, as if meaning to thrash the boy until he could not stand up.

"What does my being here mean?" Bob quivered, without flinching.

"You're shipped aboard here—that's all," roared the big man.

"Are you the captain?"

"You'll find out I am if you don't run when you get an order. Forward!"

"I won't! I won't budge!" retorted Brisbane, stubbornly. "You can throw me overboard, if you want, but you can't make me do a thing until you've explained how I came to be here."

Bob stood now with his back to the rail, but with his hands out at either side supporting him.

"You're the queerest lubber I've ever shipped," roared the skipper, looking hard at the boy.

"You didn't ship me," Bob sent back.

"Well, your friends did, and you were drunk at the time."

"You'll have to put me ashore, I guess," quavered the boy.

"Oho, we will, will we?" chuckled the red-faced captain. "Lubber, you don't seem to understand that you're on a craft bound for Valparaiso."

"Valparaiso?" uttered young Brisbane, chilled with the horror of the thing. "But I tell you, captain, I've simply got to be put ashore."

"Ho, ho!" jeered the skipper. "Lubber, the first land we touch at will be Buenos Ayres, some weeks from now, and you won't get ashore, either. Now, forward with you!"

The skipper's hand gripped the boy's shoulder so firmly, painfully, that our hero began to understand that he must obey orders, for the present, anyway.

"Captain, give me a little time," he pleaded. "My head is so dizzy that I can't stand up straight without holding on to something."

"Can't, eh?" leered the skipper, grinning at him wickedly. "Then walk about a few minutes and get your legs on. But when I speak again, you jump! Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's more like it, lubber," nodded the captain.

He turned on his heel, going back to the quarter-deck.

"Walk, I told you!" he roared, turning and glaring at the boy. "You can't steady your head by standing still. Walk!"

Bob began walking feebly back and forth, clutching at the rail.

Truth to tell, his strength was coming back to him faster than he would care to have known.

But he wanted time to think.

"What on earth can this possibly mean?" he demanded, gaspingly, of himself. "Bound for Valparaiso? Why, that's in Chili, and maybe a six months' voyage from here—all the way around Cape Horn! Six months! Why, Allison can do everything in that time. Allison? Yes, that's it! His infernal trick! I'm out of the way now. Six months? Why, mother'll either starve or go to the poorhouse in that time!"

The dizziness was getting into the boy's head again, but from a different cause this time.

Tricked? He had been so utterly fooled that his whole life must be spoiled for him now.

"I can't seem to believe it," he moaned, and pinched himself.

But he was wide awake—he very soon made wholly sure of that—and he was out on the wide, trackless Atlantic Ocean, with not another light anywhere in sight.

He felt actually sick with the dread and horror of the whole thing by the time that he stopped his walk somewhere near the forecastle.

A sailor—a young fellow—jumping to make a rope fast, paused within two feet of him.

"Listen, kid!" whispered the sailor. "Listen hard!"

"I can hear you," murmured Bob, all but under his breath.

"Don't turn—don't let anyone think I'm talking to you."

"What do you want to say? I can hear."

"Watch out for your life on this craft."

"What's that?"

"Just what I'm telling you. I didn't know what kind of a craft this was, or I wouldn't have shipped," went on the young sailor, fearfully. "But I was close to the cabin a while ago, and I heard the old man and the mate talking. Say, you won't for the life of you let anyone know what I'm going to tell you?"

"I won't," Bob promised wonderingly, fearfully.

"Hope you drop dead if you mention me in the matter?"

"I won't betray what you tell me."

"Well, then, I heard the old man whisper to the mate that you are to be lost overboard at the first chance for the job!"

CHAPTER VII.

ASTRAY ON THE DEEP.

Bob Brisbane fairly reeled.

"Steady!" warned the sailor, in a whisper. "Don't give a sign of having heard anything!"

"But will they do such a fearful thing?" breathed Bob, frantically.

"On this wicked old craft? Sure thing they will. Now, I'm going to skip before they catch me here. But watch out!"

The sailor trod briskly away.

"So this is what Nichols and that other fellow meant?" quavered dazed Brisbane. "This is the way I'm to leave life behind—out here on the great ocean, where dead men tell no tales!"

He began to feel very certain that the young sailor had told the truth.

Such an ending for him was wholly in line with all that Nichols had done.

"That note," wondered Bob, trying gropingly to understand it all. "Oh, of course, the enemy had some of Mrs. Bostwick's writing. The note was forged, and I was big enough fool to bite at the trick!"

But the present moment! All that counted now was to find some way to safety on this lonely vessel out on the great sea.

"Whatever happens, I won't let them get me in that fashion!" blazed the boy, his eyes flashing. "I may be kept out of the United States for so long that no one will know me when I go back. But I won't let myself be murdered—kicked overboard—without a kick back at someone. I've kicked before to good purpose, and I reckon I haven't forgotten how to make the kind of kick that's felt."

"Keep a-walking, lubber!" came the roaring, brutal voice of that skipper.

"I've got to make a show of obeying," quivered the boy. Turning, he started aft, still holding at the rail.

He tried to dismiss from his face the scared look that he knew must be there.

After a little Bob, still walking weakly, got past the waist of the craft.

"How you feeling, lubber?" demanded the skipper, eyeing the boy.

"Weak, sir."

"No good for work yet?"

"I don't feel as if I'd ever be, sir."

"Maybe you won't," nodded the skipper, with a grin that struck a chill to the boy's heart.

"May I keep on walking, sir?"

"All right. Go ahead—but be careful you don't fall overboard."

Again the wicked chuckle, and Bob knew that his face was going white.

Yet, continuing in the direction that he was going, Brisbane soon stepped up on the quarter-deck.

He did not know enough of sea-going matters to know that he had no right there without orders.

But the captain only eyed the boy out of the corner of one eye.

So Bob kept on until he came to the stern rail.

There he stood, leaning over, but with one eye covertly upon the captain.

Now, of a sudden, Bob Brisbane's heart gave a great jump.

Fifty feet behind the schooner, gliding and bobbing, towed a small boat.

"If I could only reach that and cut loose!" he thrilled.

If he only could!

But there, within ten feet of him, was the helmsman at the wheel.

And there, too, on the quarter-deck, was the beastly captain himself.

"No show for that trick," Bob muttered gloomily.

Yet he was fascinated with looking at the boat.

It bobbed and tugged so close to him.

"If I could only have two full minutes to myself," he all but sobbed. "Like enough, I'd drown myself, but I'd sooner do that than have someone else do it for me."

But where was the use of talking about it? That brutal skipper was watching him.

"Keep a-walking, lubber!"

Bob started to walk across the stern.

Then suddenly the skipper moved forward, stepped down off the quarter-deck and hastened forward.

"Now!" gasped Bob. "Now! It'll be the only chance!"

Nor did he dare to hesitate a second. The helmsman, with his gaze on the binnacle light, and steering carefully, was not likely to see.

Over the stern Brisbane bent. He climbed over, clutching at the line by which the small boat was towing.

He grasped at that line, and swiftly lowered himself, hand under hand.

Splash! He was in the cold water almost at once, and it did wonders in reviving his lessened strength.

As he touched the water, he began to sink with the slack rope.

It was not as difficult as it had looked. Spurred on by desperation, our hero found himself clutching at the friendly thwarts of the boat.

By a desperate pull he drew himself aboard.

Like a flash he cut loose.

There were oars in the boat. He seized them, thrust them between the thole-pins, dropped to the seat—and rowed for dear life.

Onward surged the schooner, going before a fair wind.

In a twinkling Bob had the smaller craft around, pulling like an athlete in his mad desire to get past the possibility of chase.

Still the great craft looked tantalizingly near.

Bob pulled as he had never pulled before—pulled until he came to a forced, panting halt at the oars.

And now that he had parted from the schooner, what next?

"I've no way of knowing how many hours we're out from port—or where land lies either, for that matter. Gracious! What a lonesome old place the ocean is, anyway—not another light in sight, except on that old pirate of a schooner."

While getting back his breath Brisbane rested on the oars, only dipping one in now and then in order to keep the boat from lying in the trough of the billowy sea.

But now his heart gave another great jump. A yell from the schooner!

And then, all in an instant, he saw the craft slowly turn around.

"A lot of good I did!" shuddered the boy. "They're coming back after me!"

He did not try to row now, but sat there in grim despair, almost idle at the oars.

Like one fascinated, he gazed at the great, searching craft manned by men who were seeking him out on the ocean.

Shivering, growing faint and sick, he did not realize how tiny a speck his little craft was on the ocean on that intensely dark night.

Nor can a vessel, veering and tacking back, sail straight over the course along which it has come.

So it was that the schooner went past him several hundred fathoms away, and without anyone aboard catching sight of him.

Then, after a seemingly unending space of time, the schooner once more turned and resumed its old course.

"They've given it up," quivered Bob. "Glory! Now I'm to be left to my fate—and any old fate is better than being aboard that infernal old tub!"

After a bit he resumed his rowing.

Then, having little or no idea for where he was heading,

he gave it up and drifted, merely keeping the boat's head straight.

"We're not a million miles from New York, you and I," muttered the boy, looking at the boat. "Surely there must be vessels passing now and then. If nothing comes near enough to-night to see me, there'll surely be a chance for safety when the daylight comes. That is, if a big storm doesn't come up."

Bob scanned the sky anxiously. But he was not seaman enough to know what the chances of good or bad weather were.

It was twenty minutes before he found something new to take up his thoughts.

Something away down there on the water—to the southward, he fancied—was flashing along. Then it shifted and disappeared, only to come back in his direction every now and then.

"Oh, hurrah!" Brisbane fairly cheered at last. "I know what it is—a searchlight! Some craft headed this way. Merciful heaven! I hope it don't pass too far to one side of me."

It came nearer and nearer, and at last Bob had the joy of seeing the long, darting ray rest squarely across him and the boat.

"It's coming this way, too, if it don't change its course," he throbbed, standing up now and trying hard to keep his balance.

Whip! Off came his coat. As he saw the shifting light heading his way once more he waved the garment like mad.

The light picked him up once, then shifted. But Bob was ready until it turned his way again.

Once more the light fell on him, and bigger and more glowing that ever. Again Brisbane waved.

"Glory! They're seeing me!" he thrilled, waving so frantically that he caused the little craft to lurch and wobble.

But he caught himself and stood up, blinking in the strong electric glare.

It remained turned his way now, and Bob could hear the distant chugging of engines.

Soon the light became too intense to bear. Turning his face away, Brisbane still stood until, looking over his shoulder, he could make out the outlines of a long, low, narrow craft speeding toward him as if it would run him down.

Now Bob sank to the seat, thrusting out his oars again, and waited.

Toot! toot! came a shrill whistle. The odd-looking, fast craft was so near now that the searchlight was turned away from him.

Bob could make out the heads of men peering over the bow.

Then nearer, and barely fifty yards distant, the narrow vessel came to a graceful stop.

"Ahoy, there!" came the deep-throated hail. "In trouble?"

"Adrift!" Bob answered, hoarsely. "Take me aboard, won't you?"

"Hustle, then!" came the order, in another voice. "We're on a record run, and, confound you, you've broken in on our time. Hustle!"

Bending to the oars, Bob was quickly alongside.

Looking up, he saw three faces, framed by great oil-skin caps, looking down.

They lowered a small, gangway ladder for him. Bob clutched at it as at his last hope.

"We can't take your boat aboard, or tow it," warned a sharp voice.

"Don't want you to," sputtered our hero as he stepped on to the ladder and kicked the boat adrift. "All I'm particular about is myself."

"Hustle!"

Two pairs of arms reached over, grasping him under the arm-pits and yanking him, like freight, on to the spotless deck of one of the finest racing motor-boats afloat.

"Go ahead, captain!" sang out the irritable voice.

A bell clanged, then jangled. The racing craft throbbed so that Bob could hardly stand erect on that vibrating deck.

"Come forward," called that irritable voice in his ear. "You look drowned. I'll stow you in out of the wind."

The wind? Yes, it was terrific on this lightning-gaited motor-boat.

The captain and one of his men stood forward by a wheel, steering, while a searchlight from behind played over the waters.

Under the extreme built-over bow was a little cabin.

"Get down in there," said he of the irritable voice, holding open a door.

Down into the little cabin Bob scrambled, and after him came his host, the owner of the motor-boat.

"You look drenched," remarked the owner, observing the water-soaked garments of the boy. "How did it happen."

"Shanghaied. Carried off to sea," Bob explained, briefly. "Got mad about it, of course, and so watched my chance and slipped over the stern in a boat. Then you found me. I——"

Bob stopped suddenly, for on the cabin table he had espied one of the well-known business envelopes of Frederick Allison, addressed to a Mr. Reginald Prince, at the Metropolitan Club, New York.

It was in Allison's own well-remembered handwriting, too.

But our hero turned quickly away to hide the curiosity with which the sight of this envelope had filled him.

"Get your clothes off," hinted the host, "and I'll have them dried. You can put on that bathrobe hanging there."

Prince turned his back as Bob began to pull off his clothing in haste.

"All right," announced the boy, as he wrapped the bathrobe around his body.

Prince touched a bell. A steward answered, and took away the wet clothing.

"Did you ever know a Mr. Bostwick?" asked Bob, suddenly.

Prince, a man who looked to be something more than forty years of age, turned as swiftly as if someone had struck him.

"Why?" he asked sharply.

"Oh," Bob rejoined, "seeing that Allison envelope on your table just set me to thinking."

"What do you know about Allison?" asked Prince, eyeing the boy.

"I'm very much interested in seeing Allison forced to do the right thing by Bostwick's widow and daughter," Bob answered simply.

"You are, eh?"

Prince snatched up the letter, tucking it away in one of his pockets. He did not speak.

"Can you throw any light on the affairs of Allison and Bostwick?" persisted Bob.

"Why do you ask me?"

"Because I've been studying your face," Brisbane went on, simply. "You look like the kind of man who could be trusted to do the square thing."

"Why should you think I know anything about the Allison & Bostwick business?" persisted the boat's owner.

"I assumed as much from the fact that Allison wrote you in such haste."

"What do you mean by haste?"

"Well, I couldn't help seeing that there was a special delivery stamp on the envelope."

"You're very observing," answered Prince, drily.

"Sometimes I have to be. Now, Mr. Prince, are you willing to answer my question. You'd understand my persistency if you realized how important the matter is. Do you know anything about the affairs of Allison & Bostwick?"

"If I do, I'm not supplying the information to every stranger I meet," retorted Prince, cuttingly. "And now I've got to go on deck and see what we can do to save the record run that you helped spoil for us."

Pulling on his oil-skin cap again, the owner of the craft disappeared up the steps.

"Have I put my foot in it?" wondered the boy. "Have I got Mr. Prince by the ears? And will he simply write and let Allison know all about me and my questions? Oh, I wish Prince would come in here again."

But, instead, there came only the same steward, who brought some bread and butter, cold meat and coffee.

Bob ate and warmed up. How that boat whizzed and vibrated! He had even forgotten to inquire where the craft was heading for.

But, after a while, he noticed that the craft was going slower and more gently.

Through little port-hole windows he could make out lights on either side, as if they were passing up a river.

"I'll go and speak to Mr. Prince," decided Bob, leaping up.

But the cabin door was locked—and fast!

He rang, and rang, but no one answered.

"Prince doesn't want to be seen," uttered the boy, grimly.

Then the craft stopped, and the running out of an anchor chain sounded. Again Bob rang, but without results.

Then, at last, the cabin door opened and the steward appeared, with Bob's dry clothing.

"Where's Mr. Prince?" the boy demanded, eagerly.

"Gone ashore, sir. But he told me to say that, as you'd been shanghaied, and robbed of course, he took the liberty of leaving a ten-dollar bill in your watch pocket. You'll find it there, sir, and you can go ashore as soon as you're dressed."

In the two hours that he had been in that cabin Bob Brisbane had traveled a bit more than sixty miles. In five minutes he was dressed and on deck. A waiting boat took him ashore at Twenty-second street, on the North River.

It was not yet eleven o'clock in the evening.

"Shall I wait and try to see if I can find Mr. Prince?" wondered the boy. "On the whole, I reckon I'd better not. I'll do better by waiting to see what Lawyer Hodgson has to say. And that means—back to Boston."

By the midnight train Brisbane went on to Boston again.

In the morning he went direct to Melrose.

From there, by nine o'clock, he had told Hodgson, over the 'phone wire, all that had happened, including his meeting with Prince, and the puzzle of that letter of Allison's.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TRAP SET BY A WRETCH.

"Good boy! It was taking a foolish chance to go over to New York in that fashion. But it turned out big—perhaps."

"What shall I do about Prince?"

"Nothing," replied Lawyer Hodgson over the wire.

"Will you have him looked up?"

"I wouldn't miss the chance. But we'll want you for other work, Brisbane. Remain where you are until I have things ready for you."

"That was the wind-up of the conversation between our hero and the lawyer.

Bob walked slowly back from the village to the little cottage that he and his mother called home.

"Another resting-spell, mother," he called, smilingly. "A fine job, isn't it?"

"But I hope you won't have to be away from home so long again," his mother answered.

Her mother's instinct made her worried, though she knew not why, for not a word had her son told her of his unbelievable adventure.

In the warm, bright summer day Bob, finding nothing else to do, went out and tipped a chair against the house on a shady side and sat there with a book.

The time droned away. With the book closed in his lap, our hero almost fell asleep after a while.

He had a lot of rest to make up, anyway, and he ached in every bone from his rough handling and tough adventures.

"No dog here, is there?" hailed a voice from the gate.

Bob roused with a start.

Out by the gate stood a smiling young man, hustle written in every line of his energetic face.

In one hand the stranger carried a small satchel—a peddler or sample vender, Bob classed him at once.

"Being as there's no dog, I'll come in," returned the stranger.

"Make yourself at home—in the absence of the dog," laughed Brisbane.

The stranger laughed, too, and then seated himself, with a sigh of comfort, on the grass beside Brisbane's chair.

"It's hot work traveling around on dusty roads to-day," sighed the young stranger.

"It's cool sitting here," Bob countered.

"So I'm finding out. Lord, I almost hate to begin talking business."

"Business, eh?"

"That's what. Fortunately, I find people willing to listen to me to-day, or it would be tough. Well, I might as well begin with you. Say, I've got an easy proposition."

"More proposition than I've got money, I reckon."

"Oh, this proposition don't call for money. That's the good side to it. Ever own a fountain pen?"

"No."

"Then, now's your chance," went on the stranger, opening his satchel.

Inside there were at least a couple of dozen boxes that looked as if they might contain fountain pens.

One of these boxes the young man took out, and, opening the box, produced the pen.

"Say, just try this one," he requested, passing the pen up to our hero, and following it with a pad of paper.

"Works all right," admitted Bob, after writing a few words.

"Best pen ever made," declared the salesman. "Now, I'll tell you what the scheme is. Keep the pen for ninety days and use it all you want. At the end of three months, either send the pen back to our company or mail 'em a dollar and a half. And no hard feelings if you send back the pen instead of the money."

"Is that the whole proposition?" Bob asked suspiciously.

"That's all there is to it. You just sign the agreement,

and I leave the pen in your pocket. Couldn't be fairer, could I?"

"Not very well," Bob admitted.

"Come into the house, then, and we'll fix up the agreement."

Bob led his visitor into the sitting-room.

Here the hustler produced a pad of loose sheets on which the agreement was printed.

"Just sign your name and address here at the bottom," desired the hustler. That's all that's needed."

After reading the simple agreement through our hero signed.

The hustler scanned the paper as he picked it up.

"Say," he remarked, "your writing's a heap like mine."

"So?" Bob queried, indifferently.

"Why, I'll show you," taking a stack of loose blank sheets from a pocket. "See here; this is the way I sign my name."

Slowly the stranger wrote off the signature of John Oldsby.

"See if you can do it just like that," requested the hustler.

Bob was clever enough at pen-craft to make a clever counterfeiter.

He studied the Oldsby signature for a moment, then picked up the pen and wrote an almost perfect copy.

"The small 'd' and the big 'o' ain't quite right," declared the hustler. "Look at 'em and try again. Write it down at the bottom of the sheet this time."

The hustler himself held the sheets together, while Bob wrote at what looked to be the bottom of the uppermost sheet.

"Perfect!" clicked the hustler, holding up the stack of sheets to take a good look at the last writing. "Say, Brisbane, I'm glad I hain't got a bank account. You could get that away from me with a signature so perfect."

"Tear up my copies," requested Brisbane.

"Certain, sure," chuckled the stranger, tearing some paper. Well, I must be going. Got a few more pens to leave. But, remember, Brisbane, you can send the pen back, instead of the cash, just as well as not, if you want to when the ninety days are up."

With that the hustler got under way, going out of the yard and down the road at a swinging stride.

"I don't know as that's such a bad bargain," muttered the boy, looking his pen over. "Anyway, I've got something to write with for the next three months."

And then, slipping the pen in his pocket, he forgot about it as he went back to his book outside.

Eleven o'clock brought a messenger from the town. He was asked to wait at the telephone pay station until he received a call.

"That must be from Hodgson," Bob muttered, as he started for the town.

He had not been at the pay-station more than ten minutes when he was called up.

"Who's that?" queried Bob, not recognizing the voice at the other end.

"Longnecker, clerk in Mr. Hodgson's office," came the reply.

"Oh! Well, what is it?"

"Take the next train, and come to the office. That's all. Good-by."

"About time something was happening," muttered the boy, heading for the railway station. I wonder if Hodgson is going to send me to New York after Prince?"

There was a train in a little while. On this Bob reached Boston in the noon hour.

"No use going to his office until one o'clock," decided the boy. "Hodgson will be out to luncheon."

So he strolled slowly up the street, pausing to look in at windows of stores, and taking his time generally.

But at last he turned down the street to Hodgson's office.

"There's the fellow now!" called a sharp voice.

Bob would have paid no heed, but a strong, heavy hand was laid on his shoulder.

"Want you, young man," sounded a grim voice, and Bob found himself staring into the face of a big man.

"Want me, do you?" Bob demanded. "What for?"

"Come back to the bank, and we'll make it all clear," sounded the same voice, still grimly.

"Who are you?" Bob flashed.

"Man from central office," was the cool answer. "You must have guessed that already."

As he spoke the big fellow turned back his coat lapel, displaying a police badge.

"Whew! Say," gasped Brisbane, "there's some mistake here."

"There always is," came in the detective's dry tone. "But you'll come just the same."

"Oh, pshaw! This'll all be cleared up in a twinkling, whatever it is," Bob confided to himself.

Though he was jarred a bit by this wholly unlooked-for arrest, Bob walked along confidently enough, with three other men trailing in his rear.

In through the broad portals of a bank Bob was marched, and back past several little windows to a private office in the rear.

"Mr. Robbins, here's your boy," announced the detective to a white-haired old man who sat at the desk.

Mr. Robbins turned to have a good look at our hero.

"Do you identify him?" inquired the old man, looking at the three who had come in in the wake of detective and prisoner.

"I do," spoke up one clerk, with great positiveness.

"And I," added another.

"Mr. Oldsby," spoke the bank president, to the third man of the trio, who looked like a business man, "did you ever see this young reprobate before?"

"Never to my knowledge," replied the man addressed as Oldsby.

"Did you ever see this signature before, young man?"

asked President Robbins, rising and holding a paper before Bob Brisbane's suddenly horror-struck eyes.

At the bottom of the small slip of paper was the signature, "John Oldsby."

"Did you write that?" continued Mr. Robbins, sternly.

"By thunder, I did!" gasped Bob, unwarily. "And I'll tell you just how I came to do it."

"Oh, you needn't mind that part of the explanation," returned the bank president, coolly. "Officer, can you search your man here?"

"I'm going to, whether I can or not," retorted the detective.

Then and there, before the wondering, amazed, terrified young Brisbane could object, he was held up and his pockets gone through.

From one of his coat pockets the detective drew, with a triumphant flourish, a small packet of papers, fastened with a rubber band.

"Are those the goods, Mr. Robbins?" queried the man of the police, passing the papers over to the bank president.

"The bonds to the amount of two thousand dollars, for which the forged order called," tallied off the bank president.

"That winds you up for the present, young man," declared the police detective coolly. "It's off to headquarters for you."

"But just one minute, please!" desperately pleaded Bob, who, during the last few seconds had been fearfully trying to get back his jolted-out breath, and trying to ease the rowdyish beating of his heart. "Just a moment, please. Explain, won't you, what I'm accused of doing?"

President Robbins, glaring sternly at the youngster, and pointing a denouncing finger at him, retorted:

"The case is a simple one. You presented this forged order at the paying teller's window a little while ago. On that order you obtained two thousand dollars' worth of bonds, which have just been found on you. The paying teller identifies you as the supposed messenger. So does the assistant paying teller. And you yourself have admitted that you wrote this signature. The case is conclusive enough. Any court will do its duty, and send you to prison for a long term of years."

Though Brisbane's face was blanched, and his knees threatening to give way under him, he managed to stammer out the explanation of how he really came to write the signature of Oldsby.

"And now I understand," he cried, tremulously, "how the bottom of one sheet was held below the surface of another paper, and I signed without knowing what I was doing."

"You've just admitted that you're clever at imitating signatures," sneered the detective.

"But I didn't do that with criminal intent. And I didn't bring that paper to this bank."

"These two bank men say that you did," smiled the officer, coolly.

And Bob, glaring in terror from the paying teller to his assistant, saw that both these young bank officials believed their identification to be correct.

"It was someone who looked like me," Bob protested, stubbornly.

"And the fellow who looked like you was found to have the bonds in his pocket," broke in President Robbins, dryly.

"But I——" Bob began, despairingly.

"Oh, let the courts thresh this out," gruffed the detective. "For now—police headquarters!"

Click! snap! Handcuffs were on the boy's wrists.

His brain whirling, Bob Brisbane was led out of the bank—not a felon, but as good as being a convicted one!

CHAPTER IX.

THE ENEMY STRIKES HARD.

"You're free for a few days, or a few weeks, but I don't see how we're going to keep you free longer than that."

So declared Lawyer Hodgson, as he and Bob talked things over in a private room at Young's Hotel.

For at last, after dark, Bob had succeeded in getting the lawyer to him at police headquarters.

And Hodgson brought the worst kind of news.

He had been away from his office on account of having been summoned to the home of Stanley Holcomb.

Early in the afternoon that young merchant had been struck down, at a street corner, by a cab passing at high speed.

In the excitement the driver had gotten away with his cab.

But Allison's business rival had been taken home unconscious, and his lawyer hastily summoned.

Holcomb was still unconscious, and the doctors were uncertain as to whether he would regain his mind before dying.

That Holcomb must die was the opinion of all three of the physicians.

"That's the work of Allison!" quavered our hero, turning pallid over the news.

"It may very likely be the work of some wonderful gang of scoundrels that Allison has hired," vented the lawyer.

Hodgson had succeeded in getting our hero out on bail.

"But the chain against you is as complete as it could possibly be," Hodgson warned Brisbane.

"Those fiends will be after you next!" warned Bob.

"As like as not," agreed the lawyer, thoughtfully. Then added, with sudden grimness:

"I'll give them a good fight, anyway."

"Can you let me have a little expense money on Mr. Holcomb's account?" demanded our hero, suddenly.

"Certainly," the lawyer replied, taking out his pocket-book. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Do?" quivered the youngster. "Why, I'm mightily worried over the thought of living in that lonely little cottage with my mother. We're not safe by night against such scoundrels. It's mother, in particular, that I'm worried about. I'm going straight home, and I'm going to move her this very night to one of the hotels in Melrose. Let me have a hundred dollars, will you?"

"Two hundred, just as easily," weakly smiled the stout old lawyer. "Holcomb's instructions were to let you have expense money practically without limit, so you might as well have enough. And now I'm not going to keep you, for I know you want to get home to your mother, Brisbane."

Bob hurriedly left the lawyer. On his way out of the hotel Bob decided to take an open trolley car out into the suburbs.

It would get him to Melrose as soon as the next train would do, and would leave him considerably nearer to his lonely little home.

"Lord, but I'm up a big enough tree!" quivered tormented Brisbane, as he rode homeward on the trolley car. "Hodgson has got me out on bail all right, yet he has made it clear enough to me that, unless heaven sends a miracle on our side, the Allison gang have put up a job that paves the way straight to States Prison for me. Whew! But that will break mother's heart! And mine, too," he added, brokenly.

That ride had an end, as all rides must have. Leaving the car half a mile from his home, Bob staggered onward.

He discovered how much he needed that brisk walk, for, somehow, the necessity for motion roused his blood and yet calmed him at the same time.

At last he swung around the corner of his own little road.

Then, all of a sudden, he stopped stock still.

His starting eyes threatened to pop out of his head.

"Oh, they can't have done that!" he cried out loud, in his great, swift rush of fright. "I'm seeing things—that's what!"

But another look assured him that his eyes had played him no prank.

Where the little cottage home had stood was now only a pile of dully glowing embers.

Bob darted forward, though, as he ran, he swayed as if he would topple over.

Into the yard he leaped, vaulting the fence as he went.

"Anyone here?" he shouted desperately.

He waited, chilled to the heart, but not a voice answered.

"Anyone around?" he yelled once more.

Not a sound, save the echo of his own voice from the near-by woods.

"The house burned, and no one saw it!" he sobbed.

"No; no one would pay much attention—the cottage was so far from neighbors. But mother?"

He glanced about him now, as if afraid to look. In truth, he was afraid to look.

But the situation had to be met.

His mother had always been one to go early to bed.

Undoubtedly she had done so to-night.

"If she had been up, and had discovered the fire in time, she would have gotten some of the things out," he choked. "Not a stick of furniture out here. Not even a dishpan or a flat-iron! Oh, oh, oh! Merciful heaven!"

For Bob could not conceal the apparent truth from himself.

He did not try to.

Unknown to the nearest neighbors, the distant little cottage had been fired and burned to the ground, and his mother, asleep at the time of the fire, had perished with her little home, he thought.

Frantically, Brisbane ran around the heaps of still fearfully hot embers, sending peering looks here and there.

But he could make out nothing distinctly.

Under those piles of fire-red beams a dozen scorched bodies might be lying for all he could distinguish in the masses.

"Oh, I'll—I'll kill someone for this!" screamed the boy, clenching his hands until the nails dug in and the blood flowed. "Now, Frederick Allison, I'll last until I've hounded you down and added you to your own infamous death-heap!"

Staggering back out of the heat as far as the gate, Brisbane leaned against a post there, looking at the house with dry but almost unseeing eyes.

"How could any beast ever have done such a thing as that?" he moaned.

Then he started, a little glisten coming into his eyes over just one ray of hope.

"If mother really did get away, she went to the Burkes—sure thing! Mrs. Burke is the only neighbor that mother visited much."

That thought set his feet in motion.

Yet he hardly thought, did not dare hope, as he hurried to the nearest corner, and along the road.

Not a light shone in the Burke house as Bob staggered in at the gate and rang loudly at the front door.

Nor was there any sound inside until he rang for the second time.

Then creakingly a window went up on the floor overhead, as a drowsy voice demanded:

"Who'll be there at this time of the night?"

"It's I—Brisbane. Is my mother here?" Bob queried, in a voice that crackled.

"Your mother, Bob?" repeated the voice of Patrick Burke. "Sure, she's not."

"Did you know that our house had burned down, Mr. Burke?" faltered the boy.

"Your house, is it, Bob? Are you crazy?"

"I just got out from Boston," faltered the boy. "I found our place burned out and no sign of mother."

"Hold where you are," cried the sympathetic voice of this neighbor, "and I'll be down."

"But I can't wait," protested Bob. "I've got to hurry back. Mr. Burke, will you and your son hustle around to all the houses in this part of the town, and try to get word for me? Oh, I'll go crazy, indeed, if the dear old mother has gone up in the flames!"

"We'll spend the night looking for you, if need be," returned the sympathetic Burke. "Wife, wake George up. Tell him to dress as quick as he ever dressed before in all his lazy life!"

Bob hardly knew whether he had thanked this neighbor or not.

He sped down the road again, trying dully to find some ray of hope, yet with a dull, ever-growing pain at the heart.

No! There was the pile of embers, just the same, their glow lighting up the whole yard.

"I can't go any further," groaned the youngster, toppling in through the gate, and dropping himself on the grass just beyond the scorch of the fire.

He closed his eyes painfully, wishing with all his heart that he could sleep on, knowing nothing, until one of the Burkes should come with the glad news that his mother really was alive and safe.

"But I'll have more strength in the morning," moaned the boy. "And then—Allison! But faugh! His life won't pay the debt a hundredth part!"

How long he lay there he could not remember—a minute or an hour, it was all the same now!

But suddenly he roused himself, sat up and looked at the fire with eyes glowing with hate.

"I don't suppose the police can do much of anything now," he groaned. "But it's my plain duty to notify them. And maybe the walk and seeing someone else besides myself will save me from going clean crazy before I've had time to settle with Allison!"

Painfully, weakly, he got upon his feet.

With a last despairing look at the glowing pile of burned timbers, he turned his back resolutely upon them.

Mechanically, he turned in the right direction on the road to reach the village.

The road led through a stretch of woods, yet not once did the boy dream of the possibility of meeting with harm to himself, until—

Until suddenly, from behind a tree, a man whom he had never seen before stepped squarely out in his path.

He was a rough-looking, illy-dressed fellow, with a slouch hat pulled down over his eyes.

"What do you want?" quavered Brisbane. "Get out of my way!"

"Trying to pick a row, are ye?" came the snarling answer.

"Get out of my way and let me pass!"

"Not until ye can be civil about it!"

"Please, then?" begged Brisbane, but his tone was mocking.

"Ye'll not get by here until I let ye!" snarled the fellow.

"Then, by ginger, I'll make you get out of the way!" roared Bob.

He had been clenching his hands, nerving himself for the leap.

Now he drew back, tensing himself for the spring that should hurl this bigger man from his path.

But—woof!

Struck by a club from behind, Bob Brisbane went down, in a fitting finish to the night's awful work!

"That winds him up!" chuckled the fellow who had barred Bob's way.

"Oh, we'll make sure of it!" came the swift answer, in another tone.

CHAPTER X.

THE GRIT THAT'S IN A GIRL

"Help! Murder!"

"Oh, what fearful work is this?"

"Stop, you scoundrels!"

These three cries came from as many women

One of them reeled and seemed fainting.

Another stopped, startled.

But the third—a mere slip of a girl—came forward on the run.

"Are you killing someone?" she demanded, without a trace of fear in her tone, but with every determination to stop a crime.

Criminals, even the boldest, have their moments of panicky fear.

These two, caught in their crime, and with witnesses looking on, had not the nerve to stay, even with only women at hand.

"Cut it, Bill!" throbbed one to the other, as he turned to dash into the woods.

And cut it they did, leaving only senseless Bob and the three women on the spot.

But someone else was approaching, and on a fast, hard run.

Then into sight broke Patrick Burke and his grown-up son George, the latter leading.

"What is it, ladies?" called George, halting a second.

"Oh, good-evening, Mrs. Brisbane. It's everywhere we've been looking for you, and——"

But a shriek from Mrs. Brisbane cut all else short.

She had found her son, and was kneeling beside him.

"They went this way—the assassins!" cried the girl. "Follow me! I'll show you!"

"Oh, Clara, dear—be careful!" cried the other woman of the party.

But the girl raced on into the woods, picking up her skirts a bit as she ran with almost the speed of a sprinter.

George Burke quickly caught the spirit of the thing. On he dashed, the father pounding the turf close behind the son.

They soon outstripped the girl.

Then——

"Stop, ye scoundrel, or it's a ball I'll put clean through you!"

The yell came in Patrick Burke's voice, and the son still dashed on.

But the fellow whom the older man had hailed stopped at the second call.

He stood crouching and cowering.

"Down on your face with ye, if ye don't want a hole clean through you!" roared Patrick Burke.

"Be easy on me, boss!" appealed the fellow, shakingly.

"Easy, is it?" demanded Burke, thrusting into a pocket the pipe that he had pretended was a pistol.

Then he fell upon the shoulder blades of the prostrate prisoner, going through his pockets.

"Handcuffs?" chuckled the elder Burke, bringing out a pair of the steel wristlets. "Ye carry 'em with ye, handy for the officers of the law, do ye? It's a fine bird ye are!"

Burke had clicked the steel bracelets on over the fellow's wrists, which he forced behind the prisoner's back.

"On your feet with ye!" ordered Burke, springing up and giving the fellow a jerk that swiftly yanked him upright.

"Well, what are you going to do with me?" demanded the fellow, sullenly.

"First of all, it's through your pockets I'm going, to make sure ye haven't the key to the bracelets," uttered Burke, suiting the action to the word. "Then to the jail with ye!"

"Jail?" echoed the fellow, coolly. "Then you're not a criminal?"

"Criminal, is it?" panted Burke, his eyes glaring. "If both your hands wasn't tied behind you I'd hammer your face off ye for that little question."

"I see you're an honest man," grinned the prisoner. "So hold back my coat lapel and see what you find there."

Burke threw back the left lapel, then gave a gasp of astonishment.

"Detective, ye are?" gasped the astounded Irishman.

"That's it," nodded the fellow.

"Then, what are ye doing around murderin' people?"

"You made a slight mistake," grinned the fellow, confidently. "You grabbed the wrong man—that's all. A crime had been committed. My side partner and I rushed up to the spot, when others came."

"By the glory, then, I'm a big fool! Is that it?" demanded Burke, scratching his head.

"No; you're a bit hasty—that's all."

"Hasty I am, then," nodded the Irishman.

He took another look at the badge.

"You're from Jaynes's agency?" he said.

"Yes."

"It must be a good agency," muttered Patrick Burke, reflectively.

"One of the greatest in the United States. You'll find the key to the handcuffs, my good man, in the loop at the back of my necktie."

"Is it so?" demanded Burke.

"Yes; and hurry. I don't care about being fastened up this way."

In a very deliberate fashion Burke explored the loop behind the necktie. Soon he brought to light a tiny key.

"It's glad I am I've found it," murmured Burke, slipping the key into one of his vest pockets.

"Aren't you going to take these handcuffs off?" demanded the astonished prisoner.

"Not until I've thought about it a bit, me bucko."

"But I've told you my story."

"And it's once more ye'll have it to tell," rejoined the Irishman, unconcernedly.

"What do you mean?"

"Ye'll tell it to the chief of police of Melrose. Mind, now, ye tell it the same way, or it'll look suspicious."

"Don't you believe me, my man?" gasped the prisoner.

"It ain't for me to say," retorted Patrick, unconcernedly. "The chief of police is paid for such jobs."

"Take these handcuffs off, or you'll find yourself in more trouble than you ever dreamed of," menaced the fellow.

"Is it so?" asked Burke, with interest in his tone.

"Do you know what it means to arrest an officer in the discharge of his duty?"

"Faith, I never thought to ask," Patrick replied simply.

"Then you'd better make haste to find out."

"I'll ask the chief of police down in the town," Burke promised.

"For the last time, my man," came the warning voice, "I demand that you take these handcuffs off."

"And it's for the last time I'm telling you," Patrick replied, "that it's divvle a step of any kind I'll take until I've asked the chief of police."

"Then let us get to him as quickly as we can," ordered the prisoner. "Then, as soon as the chief of police remedies your big blunder, I'll place you under arrest. You'll get at least two years for a job of this kind."

"Is it so?" asked Patrick, thoughtfully. "Then come along, and we'll ask the chief."

"Will you take these handcuffs off?"

"I will not!" And Burke's jaws clicked firmly.

Gripping the prisoner by the arm, he dragged him back to the road, where two women were tearfully administering to the still lifeless Bob.

"It's not killed the boy is?" asked Burke, in an unsteady voice.

"Oh, we hope not," replied Mrs. Bostwick, in a trem-

bling voice. "But nothing that we can do will bring him around."

"Help! Quick!"

It was a shrill, clear, girlish voice that rang from somewhere in the woods.

Like a shot, Patrick turned and was off again.

Watching his chance, the self-claimed detective broke to get away.

But watchful Mrs. Bostwick was too quick for him.

She sprang at him, clutching him by one of his helpless arms.

"Let go of me," he growled, "or I'll break your leg with a kick."

"Try it!" retorted Mrs. Bostwick, undauntedly, still holding on. "If you make a move I'll call one of the men back. What do you suppose they'd do to you if you broke my leg?"

With a grunt, the fellow became silent.

And just then three men came hurriedly into sight—neighbors whom the loud yelling for help had called out of their beds.

The prisoner was ordered to sit on the ground and not to attempt to get up.

Then, while one of the men remained to watch the other two broke off into the woods.

But Patrick Burke and his son George had already reached the spot.

Clara Bostwick, finding herself outstripped in running by the two men, had slackened down to a walk.

Going slowly through the woods, with her keen young eyes very much on the alert, she had found what she had helped to find.

Crouching in a clump of bushes, almost hidden, was the other one of Bob's assailants.

"If I spring at him," thought Clara, coolly, swiftly, "he'll be able to get the better of me. If I yell for the men, the fellow may get away before they can catch him."

So, noting out of the corner of her eye the clump in which the fugitive was hidden.

She knew, also, that his face was toward her.

"If I can pass that clump on the other side," she throbbed, "and he doesn't dare to turn for fear of making a noise. Then——"

Trembling slightly with the boldness of her idea, Clara stepped slowly past, still pretending to look all about her.

Then she turned, coming back on the other side of the clump.

She pretended to look everywhere except toward that one clump.

But her covert glance was on the cowering, hiding, breathless scoundrel.

Soon she was within three or four feet of him, still pretending not to see him in the darkness.

Then closer still, though looking away.

Clara clenched her hands in the effort to steady herself.

"Now!" she breathed inwardly.

With a quick side step, a turn and a bound, she bounced upon the shoulders of the kneeling rascal.

Ere he could brace himself, down he went on his face.

And Clara, hardly knowing how she did it, followed, planting her firm young knees on his shoulder blades.

Then it was that she called for help.

At the same time she planted both firm young hands in the fellow's hair, pulling for all that she was worth.

"Let me up," he hissed. "Leggo my hair. I'll kill you!"

"Try it," defied Clara. "Hear the men coming this way? If you hurt me, they'll lynch you."

"Leggo my hair!" the fellow almost yelled.

"Not until the men get here," the girl insisted firmly.

And thus Patrick Burke found the girl, controlling her prisoner, as the old Irishman burst into sight.

"Let me have the job," begged Patrick, huskily. "Ye're soilin' your hands on the blackguard, miss."

Willingly enough Clara surrendered her task, just as George Burke also dashed up.

Clara, standing close by, was trembling and weak-kneed now, but never further in her life from a fainting fit.

"That's both of 'em," affirmed, with delight. "George, look in the rapscallion's pocket, to see if he has steel bracelets. The other one did."

George surely enough found handcuffs, and applied them properly.

"Hold him up, lad," commanded the father. "I'm wanting a look at the rap's vest."

Throwing back the coat lapel, Patrick found himself gazing at another badge like the first.

"Jaynes's Detective Agency," read the Irishman. "I'm thinking it's a detective agency that'll bear looking into."

"It's an agency that'll look into you all right," growled the prisoner, sullenly.

"Is it so?" queried Patrick. "Then I'll be asking the chief of police down in Melrose. Bring the young lady along, George."

And Patrick, most gallantly giving his own arm to the girl, conducted her back to the road.

There was a larger group there now than when we left them, for news of unusual doings had spread fast.

The crowd was growing every minute.

But Bob?

He failed to respond to any of the efforts made to bring him back to life.

CHAPTER XI.

BOB PLAYS 'POSSOM.

"The battery is what he needs to get that heart started again," said the neighboring physician, who had been summoned in haste.

Then, after a few moments, our hero opened his eyes. The sight of the crowd astonished him.

Then he heard his mother's voice calling to him.

Like a flash our hero tried to leap to his feet.

He would have fallen had the physician not caught him.

"Mother?" he cried. "Oh, then it's all right."

Supporting the boy with one arm, Patrick led our hero to where the two prisoners, still handcuffed, were seated on the ground.

"I know that one," nodded Bob, gazing at the fellow who had blocked his path. "But the other one? He must have struck me from behind."

"We'll tell it to the chief," said Patrick, simply.

"They must be the same who set fire to our home," Bob went on.

"Our home?" broke in Mrs. Brisbane, wonderingly.

"Didn't you know it was gone, mother?"

No one had thought to tell her, in the newest excitement.

"And I thought you had been burned in it, mother," Bob cried.

"So I might have been," quivered Mrs. Brisbane, "if I hadn't gone out with Mrs. Bostwick and her daughter."

"They here?" he murmured. "I don't understand."

"Don't understand?" cried Mrs. Bostwick. "Why, you sent for us to come here. I still have your note."

"Another forgery!" throbbed the boy. "Is there no limit to what the enemy can do?"

And then another, and more awful thought struck him.

Mrs. Bostwick and her daughter had been decoyed in order that they, too, might be burned to death as they slept.

But they had gone out, in the later evening, leaving the house in darkness.

"The note said for them to wait until you came, Robert," explained Mrs. Brisbane, anxiously trying to recall it all to her son's mind, "and you were so late in getting home that we all three walked down to the depot to meet you."

"And I came by trolley. But, mother, I never wrote that note."

"Didn't write it? Who did, then?"

"We won't talk about it now, please, mother. Later."

For the surrounding crowd was looking curiously on, keenly listening.

"Neighbors," cried Bob, suddenly, as his mind became clearer, "there is much that can be done yet. There may be other prowlers of that gang abroad. The last train has gone to Boston to-night. But the trolleys are still running. Some of you ought to go to the different corners along the line. Note whoever is a stranger, who tries to go to Boston. If any stranger fails to give a good, clear answer, he ought to be yanked before the chief of police."

One of the citizens present immediately began to organize his neighbors into a volunteer detective force.

And Patrick Burke and his son went to "ask the chief of police."

In order to carry out their purpose to the best advantage, they took along with them the so-called detectives.

A neighbor who had a carriage volunteered to take the ladies to a hotel in Melrose, where they would be safe and well looked after.

But our hero, who, in his anxiety to deal the hardest possible blow to the enemy, gave not a thought to pain or fatigue, organized the remaining men into a posse to scour the woods.

In this work they could depend upon the chief of police sending reinforcements.

So the searchers started, our hero himself leading a party into the deepest stretch of woods.

They traveled quickly, too, since all depended on their making fast time.

"Burke and the chief of police will think to telephone to the other towns," flashed Bob. "That will send posses down to meet us—or ought to."

A half a mile at least from the starting point they had gone, when Brisbane saw something ahead that interested him.

First, it was a quick movement near some bushes.

Then he saw a lanky figure half dart, half crawl, into better shelter in between other bushes.

"That looks like something good, sure enough!" clicked the boy.

Yet he gave no sign, beyond veering slightly as he neared the bushes.

Nor did he cry out for help, for he was not quite sure, in the great darkness of the woods, whether the moving figure was a human being.

Coolly, as he went forward, Bob whistled an air, as if he had seen nothing and suspected nothing.

He walked as if about to pass by on the side of the bushes.

When just on the spot, however, he halted and wheeled.

"Who's here?" he demanded, coolly. "You may as well answer and go easy, for the woods are surrounded."

Immediately he was answered.

There rose before him an individual the sight of whom gave Brisbane a thrill of the keenest pleasure.

It was the hustling rascal who had "placed" a fountain pen with him—who had obtained the signature that had made Bob Brisbane out a forger.

"A nice trick you played on me!" glowed the boy. "A joke? I suppose that's what you call it. Well, you may as well walk back to the road with me. We're rounding your whole crowd up in great shape. We'll have the whole outfit of the Jaynes Detective Agency behind the bars before morning. And your employers, too. Will you walk along pleasantly, or shall I be obliged to yell for some neighbors who may decide to try a lynching on a good specimen?"

"I've no desire to meet your neighbors, or your police," was the unconcerned answer.

"Perhaps not. But they're simply dying for the wish to see you. The pleasure will be all theirs! But it'll be a lynching, as sure as guns, if you make any row."

All in an instant the half-pleasant, half-mocking light faded from the crook's eyes.

"Then I'll lynch myself, but, first of all—you!" came his retort.

As the words were spoken flash came a hidden pistol down out of his right sleeve.

He aimed fairly and pressed the trigger, holding the muzzle of the weapon straight in line for Bob's heart.

At the crack and the flash Bob Brisbane threw up his hands, pitched and fell forward.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

But the youngster had been playing 'possum.

He was not wounded—not hurt in the least.

Ere the foxy one could recover from his throb of astonishment, young Brisbane had wound both his sinewy hands around that pistol wrist.

Wrench! Bob had the weapon in his own hands, and had darted back.

"Up with your little hands, you wretch!" ordered the boy, coolly, covering the hustler.

Then the fountain pen man threw up his hands just as others of the search party came up.

"Why did you tell me to imitate the signature of John Oldsby? And why did you tell me that was your name?" Bob demanded.

"Eh? Oh, you want to make me talk, and clear you, do you?" he sneered. "I'll not say another word."

"You don't need to," Bob smiled. "I reckon my neighbors heard you admit that you coaxed me into copying your signature as John Oldsby."

"I did," nodded one of the men standing by.

"And I, too," came from others.

"It's all right," laughed Bob. "You don't need to say a word more. I'm not going to prison on a charge of forgery that I never committed—knowingly. But I am curious about one thing, though. With all the cleverness at forgery that your gang seem to have, I can't understand why you thought it necessary to get me to write that imitation of a signature. Why couldn't you have done it as well yourself, and then had others swear that I got the bonds at the bank?"

"The slickest forgery is likely to go to pieces under the magnifying glass," groaned the prisoner. "So——"

He stopped suddenly, but Bob took up the thread triumphantly.

"So that in case my lawyer got a writing expert, it could still be shown that my hand traced that forgery that you got me to do innocently?"

"You seem to have it all figured out," assented the other, dully.

"And my neighbors have heard enough admissions from you, too," laughed the boy. "Now, neighbors, why not start this gentleman for the pretty little Melrose lock-up?"

"Look, first, and see if he, too, belongs to the Jaynes Detective Agency," hinted one of the smiling bystanders.

Like a flash, Bob pulled back the man's lapel to look for a badge.

"Here it is!" discovered Bob. "And—oh, gracious! I'm awfully glad to know you by name—Mr. Jaynes!"

For over the regulation agency badge was a little arch of silver on which gleamed the one significant word:

"Chief."

Handcuffs were then found and fastened upon the prisoner, after which all hands set out for and reached Melrose police station.

In the meantime the Boston police, advised over the telephone wire, were getting busy with the Boston end of the queer Jaynes Detective Agency.

More than that, the newspaper offices caught wind of the stir-up that was going on in Melrose.

Reporters from the newspapers were hustling out on the late night trolleys.

And one of these reporters, alighting from a car, espied a man just boarding another, city-bound car.

"Why, how do you do, Mr. Allison?" cried the reporter, cordially, not knowing that the leather merchant was in any way involved in the night's doings.

But the man so addressed, starting slightly, did not turn, but hurried into the car.

Clang! clang! went the bell, and the car started cityward.

But one of the Melrose watchers suddenly roared:

"Stop that car! Stop in the name of the law!"

Clang! went the bell again. The car came to a jolting stop.

"Come with us—you!" cried the watcher, dragging the reporter along.

They entered the car, walking up to where the leather merchant sat trying to look unconcerned.

"Is this fellow Allison?" demanded the watcher, turning to the reporter.

"Frederick Allison, a leather merchant down in High street, of course," assented the reporter. "I know him very well."

"If you mean me," replied the leather merchant, turning around on the group, "there is some mistake. My name is Graves."

"I guess you'd better come with us, Allison, or Graves or whatever your name is," declared the watcher.

"Are any of you men officers?" queried Allison.

"No."

"Then I dare you to touch me!"

"Good!" gritted the watcher. "We'll take the dare!"

And take it they did, with such good effect that Frederick Allison landed in the street on his knees.

And then, all in a twinkling, the leather merchant was started on his unhappy way to the Melrose police station.

It was there that eager Bob Brisbane first set eyes on his old and bitter enemy.

"Why, old Satan is giving up all his best friends to-night!" chuckled our hero, gleefully. "Next we'll have

the boy who looks so much like me that the bank officials swore it was I who got the bonds."

That youngster wasn't found that night, but the Boston police ran him to earth the next day.

Bob Brisbane didn't sleep that night. He waited at the police station most of the time, for Allison and Jaynes, in different rooms, were being twisted on the police rack.

It was hard work to make either confess.

It was Jaynes who, at daylight, broke down and confessed to even more than the police had hoped to extract from him.

Jaynes admitted that he had been a criminal in Texas; that he had come on to Boston, and, under a new name, had succeeded in opening a private detective office and in getting a license from the State.

Jaynes's work at first had consisted largely of recovering stolen property, his large acquaintance with burglars and other criminals enabling him to recover stolen property that could not be found by more honest detectives.

But by degrees Jaynes had built up another and more profitable business in furnishing criminal services to a select few customers.

A criminal who was provided with a detective badge, and who could prove that he was connected with a licensed agency, was something so new in police annals that Jaynes and his crooked band had flourished until they took in hand the work of removing Bob Brisbane from the path of his rascally former employer.

It was proved, even, that Captain Hallis, on whose vessel our hero had been shanghaied, was a fellow who had before caused people to disappear for the Jaynes Agency.

After Jaynes had made a full confession, and his two underlings had confirmed much of it, the evidence was laid before Frederick Allison.

Then that merchant broke down and confessed to everything—even to the defrauding of Mrs. Bostwick out of her late husband's rightful share in the partnership.

As a rough guess, Allison admitted that Mrs. Bostwick was still entitled to receive from him about three hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

It subsequently turned out that the amount due Mrs. Bostwick was nearer four hundred thousand dollars.

On an early morning train came Lawyer Hodgson, who obtained a full written confession from the leather merchant.

But Bob that morning, after a freshening bath, a change of clothes and a good breakfast, went in search of his mother and the Bostwicks.

Now, for the first time, Mrs. Brisbane learned the whole startling nature of Bob's new work that had absorbed him of late.

And, too, for the first time, Clara and her mother realized through what dangers he had passed in their behalf.

"We are going to be able to repay you, as far as money will do it," cried Mrs. Bostwick, gratefully. "But, beyond money, I fail to see how we can ever hope to requite you."

"Oh, perhaps we shall find a way later," Bob suggested, hopefully.

Then, as if changing the subject, he turned to Clara.

"It's a beautiful day outside this morning," he hinted. "Won't you take a little stroll with me? I'd like to show you what a pretty place Melrose really is."

That walk was often repeated.

The Bostwicks moved out to Melrose as soon as they came into control of the money that was rightfully theirs.

Yet that money remained in the same leather business.

Frederick Allison, convicted for his crimes by the stern Massachusetts courts, went to prison for fifteen years.

There being no one in the Allison family capable of carrying on the great business, Mrs. Bostwick took charge of it.

Her representative there was Bob Brisbane himself.

And Bob, though, a mighty capable youngster, as we have certainly seen, might have found himself in too deep water had it not been that Holcomb, when he finally recovered, decided to merge his business with that of the rival Allison-Bostwick concern, and so our hero had the benefit of highly expert advice.

Reggy Prince, broker and motor-boat enthusiast, was afterwards discovered to have proof that would have helped Mrs. Bostwick to prove her claim had that been necessary.

Allison had written Prince to learn whether he could get that evidence into his own scheming hands.

Jaynes and all the more important members of his gang, including Captain Hallis, received long sentences.

Bob's own case, on the charge of forgery, was, of course, promptly dismissed.

Bob has just purchased one of the handsomest places in Melrose, for he lately obtained a bride to instal in the fine old house by the name of Clara.

And there two elderly ladies live with the young people.

"A happy family, if there ever was one!" proclaims Bob Brisbane, the boy who started his career by kicking to good purpose.

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